

THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF THE READER IN AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL POETRY BY
STEIN, HEJINIAN, AND SCALAPINO

By

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Submitted to the graduate degree program in English and the Graduate Faculty of the University
of Kansas in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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Date Defended: July 15, 2013

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Abstract

Conceptions of the subject in existential phenomenology need to be considered when defining the revolutionary reading practices called for by the Language poets of the 1970s and 1980s. Such terms expand the scholarship of Language poetry beyond the Marxist terms popular in the movement's own poetics, and thus in scholarly language, an expansion I argue is called for through the complicating introduction of the autobiographical into the "revolutionary" language. Using the vocabulary of existential phenomenology as developed by Edmund Husserl, I argue that the role of the autobiographical subject in such poetry is expanded to include the reader, in part via language that welcomes the reader into the creative process in spite of its own density and obscurity. To support this thesis, I examine Gertrude Stein's *Stanzas in Meditation*, Lyn Hejinian's *My Life*, and Leslie Scalapino's *Zither & Autobiography* and *The Return of Painting, The Pearl and Orion: A Trilogy*.

Acknowledgments

I'd like to thank all of my committee members—Joe Harrington, Debbie Mix, Iris Smith Fischer, Jim Carothers, and Judy Roitman—for their always challenging, always encouraging support throughout this process.

Brooke Taylor provided me invaluable drafting advice. Her perspectives as a Victorian scholar forced me to clarify every point of my argument, and for that I am incredibly grateful.

My parents, Mike and Phyllis Kuckelman, have been more supportive than I could have hoped for, both in their unending enthusiasm for my pursuit of the PhD and for their help with my ever-breaking car.

The rest of my family—Lauren, Britten, Morgan, Jake, Chris, Bonnie, Kristin, and Dan—have been enthusiastic cheerleaders throughout, helping me to keep up my own enthusiasm.

Finally, thanks to my husband, Kevin Beverage, who shouldered the brunt of my fears and terrors along the way. I will return the favor when it's your turn.

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Introduction: The Self and Phenomenology in Language Writing

The act of autobiography and the act of poetry, both as creation and as recreation, constitute a bringing to consciousness of the nature of one's own existence, transforming the mere fact of existence into a realized quality and a possible meaning. –James Olney, Metaphors of Self

A Phenomenology of the Human Mind

The great task that Gertrude Stein sets for herself in her 1936 *The Geographical History of America* is to determine the difference between what she calls the “human mind” and the “human nature.” According to Stein, the human mind is outside time, without beginning and without ending. It is completely ahistorical and is self-sufficient in its disregard for “audiences” and identities created by others. Its counterpart, human nature, remembers and forgets, begins and ends. It is in time, in history, and cares deeply about identity and audience. In exploring these twin facets of each person, Stein seems intent on answering the question, “how do you know you are you?” She offers two responses to this. The first, aligned with history-bound human nature, has to do with the identity of bicycle racers:

They are they because all who are there know they are they and on no account cannot they not be no not as long as they are in the race.

When they drop out well then identity may no longer be identity. They are they just the same only they are not because they are no longer identified and if they did not race at all well then not any one is any one. (142-43)

Such a fickle notion of identity! Even though “they are they just the same” upon exiting the race, “they are not because they are no longer identified.” Audience-determined definitions of identity here expose Stein’s well-documented fears of being defined, as these bicycle racers are by

strangers, by a mass of people with the power to identify merely *because* they are such a mass. As an alternative, Stein offers a way out of identity that turns decidedly inward: “I believe what I know although nobody tells me so, because I know that I believe what I know. But in doing so, there is no time in me and no identity” (186). This vaguely Cartesian claim places the onus of one’s self-knowledge or self-awareness on the knowing of knowing. Stein needs no one to tell her what she believes and therefore gains a sense of independence from audience, from group definitions.

The authors that I have brought together in this project—Stein, Lyn Hejinian and Leslie Scalapino—are all, in my assessment, writing autobiographies not of a self or life, but of Stein’s self-sufficient human mind. They write not (only) about their lived experiences, but about the process of knowing those experiences and creating them in language. This type of writing is more, to use Stein’s favorite word for ascribing value to ideas, *interesting*: “Now you take anything that is written and you read it as a whole it is not interesting it begins as if it is interesting but it is not interesting because if it is going to have a beginning and middle and ending it has to do with remembering and forgetting and remembering and forgetting is not interesting it is occupying but it is not interesting” (*GHA* 150). A more interesting form of autobiography, one that shifts the focus of the text away from the life and history of the author and onto the experience of knowing oneself knowing, would be an autobiography of the human mind. By rejecting the apparently dull task of remembering things from the past, which are mere diversions, writing of the human mind can take on the much more interesting and vital task of “writ[ing] what there is” (143). Such writing escapes the bounds of past and audience and enters a field of ever-changing possibility. We will see both Hejinian and Scalapino approach the

human mind in their own works, by, respectively, writing texts with no definite ending and conceiving of writing itself as the moment of experience.

Perhaps because of their involvement in the tradition of what can broadly be called Language Writing, Stein, Hejinian and Scalapino, to varying degrees, shift away from writing about “what you do what is done” and instead use their writings to examine “what there is.” And as Language Writing tends to expose the processes by which the world is experienced and made meaningful within and because of language, which I will discuss below, “what there is” becomes in one sense a matter of phenomenology. I will explore in what follows the ways in which the authors and texts I’ve brought together create the self as a perceiving subject always encountering other perceiving subjects—here authors and readers encountering each other in the reading/writing/creation of the text. Though I am not necessarily trying to “do phenomenology” here, I find the terms of that discourse helpful as a way to get at the creation of the self through the writing of the self. In this way, the self becomes not a product of *memory*, but a product of the present moment of *writing*. These works do not get at the *whole* of the life of the author—they do not contain it in bounded, finite and defined texts—but rather acknowledge the ever-receding conclusion, a move I acknowledge to be a phenomenological one because the self in these texts is always in the process of being phenomenally constituted. As Stein writes, “a whole thing is not interesting because as a whole well as a whole there has to be remembering and forgetting, but one at a time, oh one at a time is something oh yes definitely something” (*GHA* 151).

If there is to be a refrain to the following project, it must necessarily be a sentence spoken by Stein as her ship docked in New York for her first American tour since moving to France. Responding to an American reporter after he asked her why she didn’t write the way she spoke,

Stein replied in her typically cheeky way: “Why don’t you read the way I write?” (Brinnin 334).¹ That is, why don’t you read without beginning and ending, without remembering, without history? Since reading this line in John Malcolm Brinnin’s biography of Stein, *The Third Rose*, I have found myself returning to it time and again, using it to inform my exploration of Stein’s book-length poem *Stanzas in Meditation*, written shortly before Stein made the trip to America and met a reporter on the deck of her docking ship. This off-the-cuff remark signifies, to my mind, the establishment of a vibrant and creative relationship between readers and writers, one that, perhaps paradoxically, grants readers artistic freedom on par with that claimed by writers and poets. It is this creative relationship of equals that I explore in this project, considering in detail the ways that supposedly “difficult” experimental writing does not, in fact, alienate the reader from the text, but rather opens up space for the reader to gain full agency, to read the way the author writes and thus to use the reading experience as a way of asserting a full, conscious subjectivity.

My ultimate contention is that when the revolutionary task of reading Language Writing is taken to the autobiography, readers and writers becomes *present* to each other in truly intersubjective ways. What this means is that readers of these texts are given opportunities to create meaning with the writer, surely, but also to experience for themselves the very process of constituting oneself within text. My project is necessary to our discussion of Language Writing in its fusion of the personal and the social. It will show how the quite personal, introspective genre of autobiography can function within a poetic movement that celebrated the poem as a function of community. Ultimately, I hope to show how the very experimental language used to

¹ Brinnin quotes Stein further here to show her providing a concise analysis of our different expectations for spoken and written language: “I do talk as I write, but you can hear better than you can see. You are accustomed to see with your eyes differently to the way you hear with your ears, and perhaps that is what makes it hard to read my works” (Brinnin 335). Stein’s texts thus ask us to confront the vagaries of language as we read. We must recreate our tools of understanding and interpretation as we go.

increase community reading can simultaneously foster a vibrant sense of self and subjective experience amid all participants in a texts' creation.

Language Writing and Autobiography

Though both Lyn Hejinian and Leslie Scalapino, writing at the turn of the twenty-first century, studied, taught and enjoyed Stein's work,² my grouping of them is not based on influence, but rather on a certain affinity the three authors share in their understanding of the way language can construct an entirely new world and, in the case of autobiography, an entirely new self. This affinity is in truth shared by a number of writers working out of the loosely organized Language group active in the 1970s and 1980s. Writing in an issue of their short-lived journal *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E*, Michael Davidson claims that Stein's "prose is firmly tied to the world—but it is a world constantly under construction, a world in which the equation of word and thing can no longer be taken for granted." Stein uses, he writes, "a language that no longer needs to contain the world in order to live in it" (197). Stein's work was incredibly important to those poets of the late seventies and eighties who considered themselves a part of the Language movement (out of which the journal sprang). Her experiments with the limitations of syntax and vocabulary and her ideas about the relationship between word and thing inspired these poets to develop poetic practices that, in general, explored the literary possibilities of language that reflects a world constantly, in Davidson's words, "under construction." For the poets tied to this movement, this practice was truly revolutionary, in that it rejected poetics that simply served a pre-made, static view of the world in which the powerful remained powerful and the weak, weak. Poetry that disrupted that easy order in both its signifying practices and its formal techniques was

² The past tense here is not meant to dismiss Hejinian's continuing work in this regard. It rather acknowledges the passing of Scalapino in 2010.

meant to not only reconfigure our expectations of literature, but our expectations of the world itself. Thus Robert Grenier was able to write of Stein in the same issue of *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E*, “What poetry *does* (see ‘Poetry and Grammar’): realization of new nominatives—(not neologism but) whole text, in process, ‘replaces’ worn-out, now-merely-conventional name offered up (in title, commonly) to be melted down in crucible of language process attention forging other access to ongoing of what’s what” (205). Grenier is writing here primarily in response to Stein’s *Tender Buttons*, though his metaphor of melting down language to figure out “what’s what” renders beautifully the creative power that the Language poets saw in Stein’s writing in general. Grenier calls *Tender Buttons* a “phenomenological investigation,” writing, “the whole storm of passion, discernment, definition, feeling//carried by language//brought to the ‘budding’ of the thing” (205). My own work will expand Grenier’s interest in Stein’s phenomenology beyond the things of the world, the subject of *Tender Buttons*, and into the selves of the author and reader as phenomenological subjects/objects who meet together in the text. In fact, Grenier calls *Stanzas in Meditation*, which I will examine in detail in my first chapter, “a prototype of confessional poetry” and writes that it, along with *The Making of Americans* and *Lucy Church Amiably*, “show[s] her thinking language not as object-in-itself, but as composition functioning in the composition of the world” (206). My work will examine how the self is composed as a “composition of the world.”

Interestingly, around the time the Language poets began writing from and about Stein’s dismantling of language expectations, critics of Stein within the scholarly community had begun writing of the lesbian “coding” they saw at work in the author’s texts. These scholars, influenced in part by the work of Barthes, Kristeva, Butler, and Wittgenstein, hoped that by “breaking the

code” they might be able to figure Stein out, make her make sense.³ Davidson rejects this desire for “her to mean intrinsically” (Davidson 197). Deborah M. Mix, following up on Davidson’s phrasing, does the same: “Stein’s texts operate not by avoiding or encoding meaning, to borrow from Davidson’s formulation of the primary responses to Stein, but by opening up meaning’s possibilities. Thus a reading strategy seeking mastery, one whose goal is the creation of an impermeable and totalizing interpretation, will inevitably be frustrated by the material’s ‘movement, a shifting of words among other words’ (Davidson, “On Reading Stein” 197)” (Mix 15). In some ways, then, the effect of the seeds of revolution these poets saw in Stein (something she herself did not really care about) was a great leveling of interpretive hierarchy, rejecting the privilege of author and scholar altogether:

What this implies for the act of reading is that there are no longer any privileged semantic centers by which we can reach through the language to a self-sufficient, permanent world of objects, foodstuffs or rooms. We must learn to read *writing*, not read *meanings*; we must learn to interrogate the spaces around words as much as the words themselves; we must discover language as an active “exchange” of meaning rather than a static paradigm of rules and features....If such activity is difficult, it is only because our habits of reading have been based on a passive acceptance of the criterion of adequacy; Stein undermines the model with the simplest of language only so that we may read for the first time—again.

(Davidson 198).

Mix, who situates Stein as a sort of founder of feminist avant-garde writing, builds off Davidson’s reader-centered analysis: “By interrogating readers’ expectations, Stein’s work opens out into an examination of cultural practices of mastery, resisting the notion that mastery is a

³ See Stimpson, Fifer, and Benstock (1986) for examples of this mode of critical thinking.

potential or even desirable goal. Thus Stein's work enacts important feminist literary and social practices; replacing the patriarchal hierarchy of explanation, where the speaker/author is the expert and the listener/reader the neophyte, Stein offers a model of collaboration between equals, an intimacy of lovers" (Mix 25). My own project, stated briefly above, is to inquire into the nature of the "equals" at work in autobiographical Language Writing. *Stanzas in Meditation* offers a chance to see this equality in action, denying readers at every turn the ready-made solutions offered by a "coded" reading in which Stein's own life holds authority over all. By casting Mix's "collaboration between equals, an intimacy of lovers" in phenomenological terms, I hope to be able to articulate precisely *how* the self (and whose?) is constituted within these texts.

The collaboration of readers and writer in Stein's texts laid the groundwork for Language Writing's foregrounding of the processes by which language *creates* meaning. In pragmatic terms, members of this group—led by Ron Silliman, Bruce Andrews, Charles Bernstein and a few others—called for language that rejected the reification and standardization of meaning and social relationships they saw emerging out of the capitalist system. That is, they wanted poetry to so rattle traditional meanings that writers and readers alike were forced to produce their own new, creative meanings. This process, they hoped, would translate into social and political revolution as well. One of the more exciting elements of the theory of the Language poets was their insistence that readers actively participate in the revolutionary process, producing instead of receiving inherited meaning. Because of this reader-centered approach to poetic creation, I consider the Language movement to be in some ways a movement of phenomenology, a movement that takes as its starting premise the idea that meaning in the world is created and constituted, not discovered. While both Language Writing and phenomenology are rightly

concerned with the processes—grammatical on the one hand and perceptive on the other—by which human beings create meaning in the world, what seems at risk is the “object of meaning,” as Bernstein calls it. Bernstein, and others within the Language group, does not see Language Writing as a Derridean loss, a perpetual absence. He writes, “The lesson of metaphysical finitude is not that the world is just codes and as a result presence is to be ruled out as anything more than nostalgia, but that we can have presence, insofar as we are able, only *through* a shared grammar. That our losses are not based on the conceptual impossibility of presence in the face of the ‘objects’ of presence not being ‘transcendentally’ locked into place, but rather on grounds that each person must take responsibility for—the failure to make ourselves present to each other, to respond or act when the occasion demands” (“The Objects of Meaning” 61, emphasis in original). Bernstein thus “saves” us from the loss of meaning that potentially results from the destabilization of signifieds. Instead of insisting that presence and meaning must come from a stable signified (Truth with a capital T), he sees them emerging out of grammar that is shared simply through language-based communication. Bernstein’s suggestion that we must “make ourselves present to each other” offers the possibility of community through the reading/writing act. More precisely, this mode of poetry makes explicit the idea that community—the social—is created amid its own writing.

Writers who chose to revolutionize this shared writing risk, readers dismissing them for a perceived “pretentiousness” or “self-indulgence.” Leslie Scalapino, however, argues that in order to make such a dismissal, one must come from an *a priori* position in which the “normal” in social interactions has transcended mere description and has been reified into canonical status. If one comes from that perspective, then one gets at experience only through a “normative language” that sees the individual only “as if from the outside” (“The Cannon” 27). The

individual writer can never hope to get “inside” herself through this “normative language” and must, in her subservience to this language, only approach herself from elsewhere. In this way, “normative” always already alienates the language user from herself, making experimental, avant-garde poetry in fact a way of returning *to* the self. Scalapino’s hopeful alternative to this situation is a grand destruction⁴ of the standard that remains resolutely “outside.” She writes, “[w]ithout the conception of the social as phenomenological, actions that are rebellious in response to whatever conditions, are seen as ‘personal’ merely” (“The Cannon” 20). In Scalapino’s rendering, the way out of a conservative reification of tradition for its own sake, or experience configured as convention, is to recognize that the social itself is a function of the minds of perceiving subjects. Accepting this plurality requires, then, a sort of aesthetic phenomenology—language both springing from and forming the speaker who speaks, the writer who writes. Scalapino’s project as a whole seems to be a rejection of what she calls “aberration as failure” (“The Cannon” 20). Aberration, or any sort of deviation from a perceived norm or center, need not be dismissed automatically as insufficient, but rather can and should be seen as a way into the highly personal, highly phenomenological experience of the individual. Experience, in Scalapino’s mind, *is* writing, and thus “individuals in writing or speaking may create a different syntax to articulate experience, as that is the only way experience occurs” (“The Cannon” 26-27). Stein argued for a very similar concept. She is quoted by Brinnin as saying to those who wondered why she wrote in such a strange style, “I have not invented any device, any style, but write in a style that *is me*. You have material in yourself and in humanity

⁴ Though Scalapino never mentions violence in this essay, the title itself—“Cannon” instead of “canon”—implicitly suggests that a revolution against standards of the day will be an act of pure destruction. In this regard, she actually calls to mind William Carlos Williams’ plan in *Spring and All* to kill the past, to destroy all of Europe so that Americans may start anew with poetry fresh and untainted by their literary past. A further explanation of this connection is called for, but later.

and you apply it, that's all. I describe what I feel and think. I am essentially a realist" (Brinnin 335, emphasis added).

Though Scalapino never considered herself a formal member of any poetic group, her ideas here indicate how valuable a phenomenological analysis of Language Writing can be. With what words, she—and Stein and Hejinian—asks, do we create the world? Scalapino specifically asks us to consider how the very “personal” can actually revolutionize the “social” while rejecting the solipsism of the “confessional.” In particular, this revolution occurs through the use of language that, through its experimentation with the possibilities of signification, allows the reader to become a co-creator, and therefore, a sort of co-self. The texts under examination here—Stein's *Stanzas in Meditation*, Hejinian's *My Life*, and Scalapino's *Zither & Autobiography* and *Trilogy*—all explore, in my assessment, the self—any self—as a part of the phenomenally constituted world. In many ways, these texts discover a bridge between the community-orientation of the broader Language Writing movement and the desire to position the individual subject as a viable and important part of that community. Because of this focus on the individual here, the relationship with readers transitions away from the very broad strokes of groupthink—whether oppressive or not—and into the more “intimate” moments that Mix identified in Stein's writing. The reader's own “autobiography”—in the sense of life as writing—is a part of these texts in a very real way.

Though all these texts are quite loose examples of autobiography, a discussion of the genre is warranted. Philippe Lejeune has written what is perhaps the most oft-cited definition of autobiography: “a retrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his own existence, where the focus is his individual life, in particular the story of his personality” (Lejeune 4). He adds to this definition that in order for autobiography to function as such, the

author, narrator, and protagonist of the text must be identical, referring to the same historical person (5). In this way, then, the “I” of Lejeune’s autobiography always leads back to the “proper name,” and the connection between the “I” and the name form what Lejeune calls the “autobiographical pact,” (14). Traditional scholarship of autobiography tends to follow Lejeune’s lead, considering the content of the autobiography as “verifiable” based on its adherence to historical truth.

Lejeune’s focus on the “contractual effect” (30) of autobiography tends, even in his complicating of it, to set up the reader and author as necessarily unitary subjects who approach the text from easily defined and secure positions. Mix argues that autobiography remains popular among Western audiences in part because “there remains a liberal humanist idea of the self at the core of the autobiography, some kernel of identity underpinning all that the subject does and becomes” (100). Further, she writes, traditional autobiography insists upon a strict distinction between the self and the other. And these secure and distinct positions remain, in general, even as the autobiography expands outwards from the author to necessarily reveal the “bios” of the culture out of which it springs. Albert E. Stone argues that autobiography is necessarily cultural biography: “The autobiographer’s whole consciousness remodels the past into a narrative shape which necessarily resembles chronicle, fiction, fable, dream, and myth. But autobiography is also and simultaneously ‘history,’ ...It recreates a past shared with others, one assumed to have actually occurred and not simply imagined. For both writer and reader of autobiography, this priority of past social experience and the struggle to shape and repossess its meanings form basic conditions of the informal ‘pact’ or implicit understanding between author and audience” (3). We should notice here Stone’s use of the “pact” that Lejeune introduced. Even while autobiography is extended outward from the life of the author, it still depends on the historical author for its

validity. Without that affirmed pact, autobiography breaks down utterly and we are left with fiction only. Yet Stone also recognizes that readers become a part of this historical community in their reading of the autobiography, thus, as he says, forcing the author to “surrender[] some of the potential harmony, unity, and autonomy of art” (4).

Yet, if poststructuralist revisions to conceptions of the subject taught scholars of autobiography anything, it is that not only is the unity of the art disrupted once we dismiss the fiction of isolation into which the author had been thrust, but the unified sense of life and self is also thrown by the wayside. Sidonie Smith argues that autobiography as a genre has been so popular in the Western Tradition in part because of the persistent faith in a unified self that is “[c]onstituted neither in nor by language, [existing] prior to and independent of language, which is conceived as transparent and mimetic” (17). Over the course of the twentieth century, of course, this transcendent notion of self—a notion in fact supported by some of the philosophers whose ideas I will explore later—was chipped away at bit by bit as discourse was revealed to be the primary force shaping a person’s conception of self. Its destruction obviously brought about a change in the genre of the self. Writes Smith, “Since there remains no self, no authority, no truth outside discourse, traditional autobiography loses any special status. As the end of the century approaches, the genre seems threatened with generic extinction. Experiments in alternative autobiographical writing practices...push as far as they can against the former call to a unified, univocal self and a teleological itinerary” (60). In fact, Lejeune’s previous alignment of the author, narrator and protagonist as evidence of historical unity becomes, in this new understanding of discursive selves, a sign of disunity: “all self-narrative is necessarily non-unitary insofar as it is predicated upon a narrating ‘I,’ the self in the present of the narration, and a narrated ‘I,’ the self in the past” (Edwards 13).

With the “I” of autobiography now a fully discursive “I,” space is opened up for the “I” to do more than simply supply a history of her culture, as Stone offered, but to develop more intimate relationships with those beyond the ken of the solitary author. Natalie Edwards suggests that “[o]ne of the key concepts in this revitalized field of criticism [of the discursive, autobiographical I] has been the concept of relationality, or intersubjectivity: the relationship established by the narrator between her/his self and others, and the ways in which these others impact upon her/his developing selfhood” (19). In this way, Scalapino’s call for the social to remain a function of phenomenal processes is upheld. Others in the world, who make up the social, are permitted a productive role in the formation of the autobiography. Leigh Gilmore characterizes this shift as one that moves away from the truth/lie binary that often plagues the memoir/autobiography genre. She writes that more open understandings of the autobiographical “I” probe the “limit of representativeness, with its compulsory inflation of the self to stand for others, the peculiar way it operates both to expand and to constrict testimonial speech, and the way it makes it hard to clarify without falsifying what is strictly and unambiguously ‘my’ experience when ‘our’ experience is also at stake” (5). When the subjectivities of both the author and the reader are disrupted, however, the “standing in” that Gilmore identifies becomes more difficult, as there can no longer be an easy replacement of *one* for the *other*. Rather, there is always already two and three and four and so on. There is always “we.”

The role that readers play in creating such an autobiographical self becomes a communal process, quite literally. Hejinian notes that within any autobiographical description, the writer is creating a world that the self—no matter how destabilized—is a part of, and, further, that the reader is always part of this world. “The reader too,” she writes, “is the entity we call a person” (“Person and Description” 204). James Olney shares Hejinian’s interest in the reader by actually

extending the “I” of the text to the reader. Using a phenomenological framework, Olney writes of a self “that defines itself from moment to moment amid the buzz and confusion of the external world and has a security against that outside whirl. The study of how autobiographers have done this—how they discovered, asserted, created a self in the process of writing it out—requires the reader or the student of autobiography to participate fully in the process, so that the created self becomes, at one remove, almost as much the reader’s as the author’s” (“Autobiography and the Cultural Moment” 24). The self that emerges as the text is written is thus shared across the varied and multiple readers of the text, changing with each creative reading.

The rejection of the idea of the unitary subject and the welcoming in of the multiple subjectivities of the author and reader together make the blending of autobiography and poetry an exciting concept. In part this is because, as Language writer Michael Palmer argues, poetry, or, at least the kinds of poetry Language writers call for, rarely makes any sort of claim for the inclusive totality that some prose narratives suppose: “By foregrounding the inherent complexities and complex possibilities of discourse, poetic speech often becomes paradoxically more direct in its presentation than apparently simpler forms of writing; the evasions, displacements, recurrences, etc., stand as an immediate part of the message....what is taken as *a sign of openness*—conventional narrative order—may stand for concealment, and what are understood generally as *signs of withholding or evasion*—ellipsis, periphrasis, etc.—may from another point of view stand for disclosure” (Palmer 227, emphasis in original). Poetry, then, foregrounds and intensifies the role that language, in all its messiness, plays in creating the autobiographical subject. Despite the presence of the historical author as overarching antecedent to the text, the sense of *self* revealed in the text is a self necessarily displaced by the difference upon which meaning in language depends (Benstock, “Authorizing” 1150).

One of the things that connects these three authors—Stein, Hejinian, and Scalapino—together in my reading is the fluidity with which they integrate their own lives, emotions, fears, and, perhaps most excitingly, their own poetry, into any sort of theoretical work they perform. In doing so, these authors insist that selves, and thus conscious, intentional processes, are always a part of the world itself. Further, the readers must be welcomed into this process, as their selves become a part of the creative process. Stein, for example, devotes most of her *Lectures in America*, which is subtitled *The Great Writer Discusses Her Concepts of Art*, to analysis and explanation of her own texts and composition processes. Hejinian in turn uses *My Life* to explain her concept of the open text in “The Rejection of Closure.” And in Scalapino’s essay “The Radical Nature of Experience,” in which she analyzes poetry by Philip Whalen and Susan Howe, she makes a point about the action of plays by citing a reading of one of her own plays (11). Their sense of who they are as writers, then, is always already a part of their theory and thus is always being examined at the same time that the world at large is being examined. Hejinian writes in “The Rejection of Closure,” “For the moment, for the writer, the poem *is* the mind” (44, emphasis in original), so that a study of poetry, whoever’s poetry, becomes at the same time a reflection back on oneself as a creator and reader of poetry. Olney writes that this tendency to see the self as a perpetual object of study is not just part of the autobiographical project, but in fact is part of any philosophical engagement with the world: “However we take hold of the question of knowledge, we are always brought back, with Heraclitus, to the beginning; knowledge in this state, in this fallen and sinful condition as the scholastic philosophers would say, must always be, can only be, human, individual, and subjective. A theology, a philosophy, a physics or a metaphysics—properly seen, these are all autobiography recorded in other characters and other symbols” (*Metaphors of Self* 4-5). And while we may quibble with Olney’s neglect of one’s

community or culture in such a claim, he offers a reason for autobiography at all. Through its writing, the world becomes known. Olney writes further about how writing creates meaning in the world, a familiar concept for the Language writers: “In the given, whether it be external reality or internal consciousness, there is nothing to be called meaning: the world means nothing; neither does consciousness per se. Our sense that there is a meaning in something—in a poem, in experience—comes only when the elements that go to make up that thing take on relation to one another” (30-31). But Olney specifies, as do the Language writers, that the reader must necessarily work with the author to create the meaning in the world. “The reader, like the poet, extends the possibilities of meaning-pattern in himself; he extends, that is, the pattern, or the adequacy of the pattern, which in turn may be taken, as it were, for a metaphor of his self” (5). Autobiography is not simply a self-turning genre, an expression of some mythical core. Rather, it is an opportunity for writers and readers to work together to make the world meaningful via an exploration of self.

Language Poetry as a Phenomenological Project

As explained above, Language writers in general rejected the idea of a transcendental, core self that stands behind any writing, whether autobiographical or not. Edmund Husserl maintained the existence of a transcendental, monadic subject as the backbone to his intentional description of the world. Therefore, it may seem paradoxical to claim that an analysis of Language Writing can be productively conducted through a phenomenological lens. However, I see an affinity between these two theoretical perspectives in the following way: both are intensely concerned with the *processes* by which human beings make meaning and truth in and of the world. Further, as scholars following Husserl have extended, revised and developed his

writings, they have incorporated into phenomenological concerns an understanding of the major role that language plays in shaping our intentional perspective.⁵ Intentionality, for phenomenology, is the idea that consciousness is always consciousness *of* something, so that our conscious processes are always, in a way, directed outward toward an object of that consciousness; that is, in phenomenological terms, there is never an abstract consciousness that simply exists without perceiving. The “intended” world, in the phenomenological sense, is simply that world that is perceived by consciousness, though in some ways it’s a bit of a redundant term, as we can only know the intended world since we can’t know a world outside of our intention of it. Intentionality, both in phenomenology and throughout this project, then, is the outward-directed *movement* of individual subjectivity. The overarching goal of phenomenology is to explore the processes by which we intend the world and through that intention make—not, significantly, receive—meaning out of that world. In some ways, Stein’s own experiments with language reveal the ways it participates in the always intentional functions of consciousness: “It is impossible to put [words] together without sense. I made innumerable efforts to make words write without sense and found it impossible. Any human being putting down words had to make sense out of them” (“Transatlantic Interview” 18). Stein discovered, then, that words, like consciousness, must always point outward and away. They must signify just as consciousness must intend.

When, in the early 1970s, the poets who would eventually become the very loosely organized Language group began forming their conception of the late century avant-garde, they were responding to the trend toward expressive, confessional poetry they saw “bubbl[ing] up from creative writing workshops—brief narrative with moralizing codas” (Silliman et al 263). George Hartley describes this type of writing, which dominated the 1980s, as the “voice poem.”

⁵ See Butler, Natanson and Cunningham for examples of this type of work.

This poetry espoused “the notion that the poet (a self-present subject) transmits a particular message (“experience,” “emotion”) to a reader (another self-present subject) through a language which is neutral, transparent, ‘natural’” (Hartley xii). In a 1988 manifesto, Silliman and several other Language poets argue that they’ve been neglected by the critical mainstream in part because “our work denies the centrality of the individual artist” and challenges the idea of “the self as the central and final term of creative practice” (Silliman et al 263). The idea, then, that the poem expresses some inner core or emotional state of the poet is done away with in favor of a poetics that considers the “I” of poetry as “that sense of a connection between discrete conceptions which has been habitually effaced from the processes of thought and language” (Silliman et al 266). Just as it dismisses the core, inner self, Language Writing rejects the idea that any one style of poetry is a more “natural” or “authentic” style and that the best poets are simply those who most honestly reveal themselves in their words. Charles Bernstein, for example, writes that “there is no natural writing style; ...the preference for its supposed manifestations is simply a preference for a particular look to poetry & often a particular vocabulary (usually perceived as personal themes); ... the cant of ‘make it personal’ & ‘let it flow’ are avoidances—by mystification—of some very compelling problems that swirl around truth-telling, confession, bad faith, false self, authenticity, virtue, etc” (Bernstein “Stray Straws” 42). Rejecting the Romantic idea of the poet spontaneously overflowing with gently tempered emotion, Bernstein reminds, *insists*, that all language usage is merely convention. Rather, as Hartley explains, “what looks natural about a given poem is actually the result of a number of procedures and assumptions about writing that the author may be more or less conscious of when composing. Those procedures and assumptions are in fact social constructions which have become conventions. Thus most Language poets attempt to remind us of the socially contrived

basis of any writing” (Hartley xiii). Jed Rasula further argues that to write as if an already formed community of writers and readers did not exist is to descend into a very dangerous form of solipsism: “What presently seems to count among writers [of voice poems] is that the writing be psychologically valuable to the writer, but this is simply to increase the hold solipsism already wants to maintain on us. The communality of the reading/writing circuit is composed entirely of readers, not writers” (Rasula 52). Rasula makes two key points here. First, he rejects out of hand the idea that writing must reveal important psychological truths about the writer. The idea of there being an inner reality apart from the outer reality of one’s lived experience of the world at large is thus dismissed. Inner lives are transformed into outer lives, inner truths always already subject to their outer manifestations in language, so that the poet is actually stripped of a monadic inner life separate from the outer world. In this second point, Rasula merges the function and responsibilities of readers and writers, so that the writer actually becomes the reader of her own words, foregrounding the interpretive act embedded in each and every language use, and the reader becomes a writer of the words he reads. The foregrounding of the reader’s creative role in any act of reading was a vital part of the project of the Language poets: “Language Writing is often posed as an attempt to draw the reader into the production process by leaving the connections between various elements open, thus allowing the reader to produce the connections between those elements. In this way, presumably, the reader recognizes his or her part in the social process of production” (Hartley xiii).

The production-based vocabulary of Hartley’s statement here indicates how firmly tied the Language poets were to Marxist theories of production and consumption. In particular, some Language poets saw the perceived “naturalness” of psychological poetry emerging out of a “reification” of language. Silliman, for example, argues that the high value placed on realism in

literature can be tied to the way language has become a player in the game of production and consumption:

What happens when a language moves toward and passes into a capitalist stage of development is an anaesthetic transformation of the perceived tangibility of the word, with corresponding increases in its descriptive and narrative capacities, preconditions for the invention of “realism,” the optical illusion of reality in capitalist thought. These developments are tied directly to the nature of reference in language, which under capitalism is transformed (deformed) into referentiality. (“Disappearance of the Word” 125)

The referentiality Silliman refers to here is the mistaken notion that language has some mystical, exact correspondence to the “real” world. Such a reification of language results in claims of rightness and wrongness and tends to value realism above all other modes, rejecting any pretentious experimentation with the possibilities of what language can say. Authors who do not conform to the major tenets of realism are thus rejected—by individual readers and by taste-makers in general—for their perceived inability to say something “meaningful” about the lived experiences of the reader. Yet the risk of realism, or any genre that falls easily into previously received patterns of reference, is that readers become perhaps overly comfortable with simply *receiving* images of the world from some authority, no matter how revolutionary those images are. We are reminded here of Scalapino’s claim that any writing of the self must create new forms of language or risk remaining perpetually “outside.” As an alternative, Silliman argues that poetry should participate in the “dialectical process” in order to reveal the underlying social origins of phenomena and to indicate possibilities of social action: “The social function of the language arts, especially the poem, place them in an important position to carry the class struggle

for consciousness to the level *of* consciousness” (131, emphasis in original). That is, instead of simply *imagining* the process of gaining consciousness of and agency in the social order, poetry should *facilitate* that process by providing opportunities for the reading and writing mind to assert its own conscious intending of the world.

And it is here that we can see Language poetry exploring not just the *social* structures that inhibit free play of language but the structures of the *mind* that do (or do not do) the same. In general, phenomenologists claim that we can know of no world apart from a world perceived and interpreted by human beings, in that once we know a world, it is always already known and interpreted by humans—we *can never consider an unconsidered world*. Gertrude Stein, though not usually considered a phenomenological poet by scholars, early on in her theory articulated how relationships between words and things can be rethought and recontextualized within the phenomenological moment. In her essay “Portraits and Repetition,” part of her *Lectures in America*, she writes of the way her relationship with words began to change around the time she wrote *Tender Buttons* (1914). She writes that at that time in her writing she was very little interested in writing about emotion, since she had a fully emotional life: “I lived my life with emotion and with things happening.” But, she counters, her art involved something completely different: “I was creating in my writing by simply looking” (*LIA* 191). This looking, she writes, is “the great problem of our generation” (*LIA* 190). She seems to implicitly acknowledge here the Modernists’ shift away from the objective sort of realism popular in the nineteenth century, as the “looking” she is interested in is not the impossibly objective looking of scientific observation, but rather the subject matter itself. That is, she wants to write the looking, not simply the looked-at. During this time, in part because of her close relationship with Cubist visual artists such as Picasso, she began experimenting with ways in which the act of looking

itself could be recreated in writing. For her, however, the act of looking is not separate from the essential being of the thing she looked at, and so she began pursuing new ways of relating words and things to each other that reflected this dual interest: “I became more and more excited about how words which were the words that made whatever I looked at look like itself were not the words that had in them any quality of description” (*LIA* 191). Stein is insisting here on the self-reflexivity of the things she sees, for she is looking for words that make the thing “like itself.”

She elaborates this idea further:

And the thing that excited me so very much at that time and still does is that the words or words that make what I looked at be itself were always words that to me very exactly related themselves to that thing the thing at which I was looking, but as often had not had as I say nothing whatever to do with what any words would do that described that thing. (*LIA* 191-92)

Here, Stein expresses quite simply her rather radical conception of the role language plays in mediating (or, perhaps, arbitrating) the relationship between the perceiving consciousness and the things of the world brought into this particular point of view. Let me explain. First, Stein references the perceived thing four times in this one sentence, using three unique phrases: “what I looked at,” “that thing” (used twice), and “the thing at which I was looking.” The phrase “the thing at which I was looking” follows immediately behind the first “that thing,” which makes it seem more like a corrective, as if “the thing at which I was looking” is the correct way of designating, for example, the chair that is currently in my line of sight. These various phrasings all insist upon the primacy of the viewer’s perspective on the thing perceived with varying levels of intensity. Further, by rejecting the scientific process of description in the last line, Stein shifts us into a phenomenological moment. She is concerned with *being*, but being always and only

accessible through a limited, “to me” perspective. Raw existence and subjective perspective coexist here beautifully, and we are meant to understand that a focus on one need not preclude the other. Edmund Husserl pursues this question in his *Cartesian Meditations*, writing, “we can ask any vague consciousness whether, and to what extent, while the identity of the meant object is preserved, the meant object in the mode ‘it itself’ corresponds (or can correspond) to that consciousness” (58). Husserl uses the term “evidence” to indicate the process by which we as perceiving subjects come to know the actual or potential existence of an object, evidence that only exists *as evidence* when it is perceived as such by a perceiving subject. Husserl writes, further, that “Everything that exists is ‘in itself,’ in a maximally broad sense, and stands in contrast to the accidental being ‘for me’ of the particular acts; likewise every truth is, in this broadest sense, a ‘truth in itself.’ This broadest sense of the In-Itself refers us to evidence, not however to a particular evidence as a de facto experience, but rather to certain potentialities, which are grounded in the transcendental Ego⁶ and his life” (61). For Husserl, then, though a thing has existence “in itself,” its “accidental being” is available to us through the evidence that we constitute through our intentional encounters with the thing. The “for me” accidental being of a thing is always bound up in the perceived thing’s potentiality: what might it be or become within my intentional encounter? Stein’s “looking,” described above, participates in this focus on the potential by rejecting the “actuality” of description. The idea that one’s words can make what one looks at “be itself” indicates that someone else’s words could do the same thing, so that the being of the thing looked at is a potential being, subject to the intentional activity of the poet and, I will argue, the reader.

⁶ The use of the term “transcendental Ego” throughout references to Husserl’s work here must be in a way bracketed. Scholars working in the phenomenological tradition have done away with this term, arguing that the perceiving Ego can never transcend the world s/he perceives, both because of the material reality of the body within the world (Merleau-Ponty) and because of the role language plays in our intentional activity in the world (Cunningham).

Phenomenology, then, studies the processes by which these intentions are made, making it a dynamic instead of static philosophy. Maurice Natanson, in his book *The Erotic Bird: Phenomenology in Literature*, writes that in the phenomenological enterprise “we are not talking of the ordinary thing observed or of the psychological activity involved in observing it, but instead we are concerned with a ‘reduced’ field: the essential structure of the act of intending and the essential structure of the correlate of that act” (Natanson 39). A general poetics based on Language Writing extends this philosophy to assert that these interpretive structures at the heart of our consideration of the world are not possible without language, that language necessarily provides the very structures by which we shape our perspective on the world. Charles Bernstein, for example, writes,

The distortion is to imagine that knowledge has an “object” outside of the language of which it is a part—that words refer to “transcendental signifieds” rather than being part of a language which itself produces meaning in terms of its grammar, its conventions, its “agreements in judgment.”. . . [W]e are initiated by language into a (the) world, and we see and understand the world through the terms and meanings that come into play in this acculturation, a coming into culture where culture is the form of a community, of a collectivity. (“Objects of Meaning” 60)

Elsewhere, he writes, “there are no thoughts except through language, we are everywhere seeing through it, limited to it but not by it. Its conditions always interpose themselves: a particular set of words to choose from (a vocabulary), a way of processing those words (syntax, grammar): the natural conditions of language” (Bernstein “Stray Straws” 44). In making this claim, Bernstein explains in perhaps a more precise way what Martin Heidegger is getting at in “Poetically Man

Dwells,” when he insists that man cannot be dominant over language, that man must in fact *listen* to language in order to free himself, to speak most feely about the world:

Man first speaks when, and only when, he responds to language by listening to its appeal...the responding in which man authentically listens to the appeal of language is that which speaks in the element of poetry. The more poetic a poet is—the freer (that is, the more open and ready for the unforeseen) his saying—the greater is the purity with which he submits what he says to an ever more painstaking listening... (214)

In Heidegger’s description, language facilitates a gradual coming to meaning, not just enabled by but in fact *created* by the very tools the project demands. What is interesting here is that both he and Bernstein, despite very different views of what constitutes “poetry,” seem to argue for a sort of submission to language. We are to “listen” to a language that always “interposes” itself on us. Yet, paradoxically, it is only through such a listening that we are ultimately “free.” We should be reminded here of Scalapino’s call for ever new languages that manifest from within. We are not to listen to the “rules” of language, to the limited definitions, but rather to listen to language as a process of conscious intending. Through that process, then, we create the world.

The meaning one creates in language could thus be called an always in-process meaning—a sort of ever-receding, yet ever-growing chain of connections. As such, in order to explore these meanings we need to examine the “mobile” elements of language, the functional elements that provide bridges and byways across and through our intentional activity. The concept of perceptive “horizons,” developed in different ways by Husserl, Merleau-Ponty and William James, works well in this endeavor, showing just how closely our perception of objects can be linked to the realization of that perception in language. In Husserl’s analysis, one’s

perception of objects in the world functions on the basis of the appearance of different aspects of that object to one's perceiving consciousness (Schutz, "William James" 9). That is, each perceiving subject can see the perceived object from only a single point of view at a single moment in time. Different parts of the object (such as its backside, its underside) are only revealed as the viewer shifts his perspective in both space and time. Husserl calls this the object's "inner horizon." Merleau-Ponty, in his explication of the idea of horizons, emphasizes the fact that the perceiver can never have access to an ideal whole, but rather that the totality of the object is "open to a horizon of an indefinite number of perspectival views" that blend into each other, thus constituting the object ("Primacy of Perception" 16). This view of perception insists that one can never know and understand any thing, person, or concept in its entirety, but that any understanding must always be based on the subject's limited perspective. In addition, that limited perspective is always restricted by the spatial and temporal boundaries of the embodied subject. There is not nor can there ever be an instantaneous grasping of the whole. All experience and understanding are bound to this same spatiotemporal location.

When James takes up the concept of horizons, he does so in terms of the perceiver's understanding of the relationships that bind one object to another. In James' view, one's thoughts about an object or objects are not isolated units that the mind jumps to, one from the other, but rather "substantive" parts we are led to by more "transitive" parts (James 243). These transitive parts are basically the relationships that exist between the substantive parts (Schutz, "William James" 9). James calls these transitive spaces the "fringes" of thought and by those fringes refers to those qualities of an object that are independent of that object: "Knowledge *about* a thing is knowledge of its relations. Acquaintance with it is limitation to the bare impression which it makes" (James 259). Matti Itkonen describes these fringes as "the object-independent qualities

and phenomena which appear in the mind as the fringes of meaning and relationships. Some—transitive—elements in the stream of thought perceive relationships rather than phenomena. Both independent and transitive components form one uninterrupted stream in which there are no isolated sensations” (151). Within a phenomenological framework, these fringes help perceiving subjects create relationships among various objects that help us identify those objects. For example, we are able to recognize a tree as being a tree, even if we have never seen that species before, because we create a relationship between that tree and others we have seen, and between that tree and the non-tree bush that stands next to it and is shorter, rounder, trunkless, and so on.

Importantly, amid the movement from one substantive part of thought to another, and amid the gradual unveiling of the perceived object relative to one’s particular spatiotemporal location, there exists a continuous and perpetual uncertainty about what we might call the “true nature” of the perceived object, an idea which should recall us to the Language poets’ contention that there is no core—true—self to stand behind poetic expression. This uncertainty of identity is maintained through what Merleau-Ponty has described as a tension between every object’s “immanence” and “transcendence.” Every object, he writes, is always already immanent, in that the “perceived object cannot be foreign to him who perceives,” and yet simultaneously and always transcendent, in that “it always contains something more than what is actually given” (16). Thus, all objects are given to our perceiving consciousnesses in a perpetual state of presence and absence, unconcealment and concealment. And no matter how many ways we find to examine a particular object, part of that object will always remain concealed because, as situated beings, we cannot take in the thing in its entirety. Yet Merleau-Ponty does not consider this perpetual limitation in human understanding as a failure or weakness; in fact, he considers such persistent uncertainty to be at the very core of what distinguishes human interpretation of

the world from a simpler animal participation. He writes that the uncertainty resulting from an always-limited perspective on the “substantive” parts of the world engenders an ultimately necessary “openness to *something*. What saves us is the possibility of a new development, and our power of making even what is false true—by thinking through our errors and replacing them with the domain of truth” (21, emphasis in original). Thus the wonderful element of our situated, always limited understanding of the world is in fact the finitude of its scope; it is that very limitation that opens us up to the always-present *possibility* of reaching a “domain of truth.” To my mind, this is a quite exhilarating rendering of human perspective, for it locates the human being not in a place of static Truth that merely needs all its parts ordered and fit together correctly, but rather within a field of perpetual growth and change, so that not only does our perspective on elements of our world constantly change and adapt to new information, but also our understanding our own place within that world—our conception of what it means to be a human being at all. While this seems an obvious statement—one need only look at the way philosophy, art, and the sciences have changed throughout centuries and across continents—it bears stating here in order to emphasize that human understanding of the world depends on the ever-present possibility of there being something beyond what is currently known. We are just as much in the presence of the unknown as we are in the known.

Language facilitates this access to the possible, for even as language in general shapes every thought and relationship we have, any single language, like any single object, is itself unknowable in its entirety. Paul Standish, referencing the writings of Wilhelm von Humboldt, characterizes language as a web that can never be known to the individual subject as a complete whole. No one person can know every definition of every word in a language, let alone what situations call for such words and how words are changing in all places at all times. These

“unchartered realms” of language are necessary for human development, in that it is through our discovery of new “spaces” within language that we are able to discover new understandings of our selves: “Out of this web man is in some sense constituted: through expression new modes of feeling are developed, enabling man to become more refined, more powerful, and more self-aware: in expression our emotions become human” (Standish 129). In addition, this growth of understanding necessitates that we listen to language, because “the acquisition of a greater and more refined vocabulary may enable us to think in more subtle and more profound ways.... In language there is the possibility that we can sound the depths of our experience” (Standish 154). The Language Poets themselves found this idea particularly compelling; it informed their revolutionary bent. In welcoming theory into their poetic explorations, they considered themselves to be probing the depths of the unknown:

In our use of [theory], we would emphasize the prospective and question the dogmatic, looking for options and constructive potentials rather than closure or limits. We propose not a ‘pure’ language but a ‘contaminated’ one, testing the relations among its constituent elements and forms, from which we do not exclude theory. This is as much as to say that our writing has committed us to *more than we know*; to admit theory into our practice is to imagine what is yet to be written. (Silliman et al 269, emphasis in original)

Silliman’s and his co-writers’ claim is a phenomenological one: “contaminated” language foregrounds possibility instead of actuality, reaching always into the unknown. It allows the present to be constituted moment by moment, word by word, silence by silence.

Yet language enacts this moment-by-moment constitution not simply by insisting upon the ever-present possibility of the unknown, but also by mirroring the time-bound revelation of

perceived objects to our perceiving consciousnesses. Whether written or read, spoken or heard, language can only ever reveal words gradually, sound by sound, image by image. Far from being a limitation to language's speed of revelation, the gradual progression of words is necessary for relationships *between* words to emerge or be created and, out of those relationships, meaning. Without the space for these relationships to develop, there is no possibility of meaning at all. Words spoken all at once (by multiple speakers) are heard only as noise; words printed all on top of each other turn into pure image:

The tree is next to the house.

~~little~~

The gradual revealing of language across time (and space, if printed) is where the relationships that create meaning reside. It is this necessary temporality that leads Standish to argue that the “time-consciousness” of language relates specifically to not only our intentionality of the world, but also our understanding of ourselves as meaning-creating subjects: “Any analysis of language presupposes some idea of the nature of persons. A criterion for personhood is awareness of oneself as an agent; and an agent is necessarily someone who has the power to act on the world, to affect it in the future” (Standish 152). Without language, then, the intentional world is lost to us, for it is through language that we are able to conceive of ourselves in the future and recall ourselves in the past. Itkonen claims, then, that it is through language—and the gradual revealing of words and relationships in time—that we transcend our immanent limitations: “If someone is writing in his own here and now, he is working within a reality considerably more extensive than that currently present to him. It must further be stressed that this horizon is exclusively his own; memories arise out of his selfhood and anticipation takes him into what is yet to come—retention

and protention meet in the present moment” (149)⁷. The gradual revealing of words whose relationships constitute meaning, then, brings together the absence of the past and the future into a present/presence. Through language the possibility of the future is posited, while at the same time past knowledge (through which we create relationships) is recalled.

According to Husserl’s and James’ theory of horizons, outlined above, objects in the world are perceived bit by bit based on the particular spatiotemporal location of the perceiver. Sentences, as I’ve argued, function in basically the same way. Whether written or spoken, they are necessarily revealed in time, the relationships between words and phrases—the relationships out of which meaning emerges—gradually emerging as the eye moves across the page, as the ear hears the speaker’s voice. And yet, even when the end of the sentence, or paragraph, or document, or even the entire utterance is reached, the (imagined) total meaning is still out of reach, concealed by the very relationships that provide the fertile ground for meaning in the first place. The reason for this concealment, according to Carmen López Sáenz, is that if “meaning only appears as the intersection of words and in the interval between them” (Merleau-Ponty, *La Prose du Monde*, 167, qtd in Sáenz 32) then language is not in fact composed of the words themselves. Language is, in fact, *silence*, the space between the words (the space of relationships). This silence, then, leads to what Sáenz calls an “indirect” positioning of human beings in the world: “Corporal or perceptive consciousness is indirect because it is, simultaneously, the perception of something and the lack of perception of a background in which it is implicated. In the same way, language is indirect because it comes from a silent background,

⁷ I would argue against Itkonen’s claim, though, that the horizon is so “exclusively” the language user’s “own.” For even while the details of the person’s past and present are known and interpreted only by her, the tools used to perform that interpretation—language—come from a fully social experience. As soon as we begin using language, we are not alone.

operative intention; thus, language makes things themselves speak and shows how it intertwines with the perceptive world” (30).

What I’d like to emphasize here is that by considering meaning as that which emerges out of the “space between” words, language and perception are both highlighted as dynamic activities, founded on movement. (The idea of betweenness itself signifies a movement from one contact point to another. Between is always already two.) And out of this dynamic activity comes, according to Alfred Schutz, a unity of consciousness that consists of “its through-and-through connectedness” (Schutz, “William James” 3). Schutz points out here that both Edmund Husserl and William James believed consciousness functioned in this dynamic, connected way, and not in an atomistic way, jumping from one isolated idea to the other.

The texts I am examining in this project emphasize the fluidity of conscious, intentional life in part by rejecting various “atomistic” elements of language commonly thought to play the substantive, meaning-laden roles. Each of these authors utilizes silence and absence to a marked degree, a move that I argue overall leads to a renewed and creative reader/author relationship. To explain, let me return for a moment to Sáenz’s claim that language “comes from a silent background.” My interpretation of this idea is that while the use of language necessarily implies a silence out of which the words emerge, that silence remains and actually becomes part of the relationships I’ve been referring to that constitute meaning and the subject’s experience of things in the world. Yet, language and perception always participate in an insurmountable concealing of the thing perceived, the idea articulated. Each utterance is thus composed not only of relationships between multiple unconcealed concepts, but also between what has been unconcealed and what remains concealed. When words are spoken, the articulated concepts stand out in relief against a background of unspoken words, concepts left unarticulated, just as a thing

perceived stands out in relief against that which is not perceived (or that which is only present in a vague background). Yet the not-spoken, the not-perceived—the concealed—is not banished to a sort of vacuum of unarticulated ideas, but rather paradoxically remains present to us as part of the unconcealed. Givenness, a phrase that describes the way the world is present to perceiving subjects, is thus always already about withholding as well, and to reject that which is withheld in favor of only that which is present is to reject the possibility of choice that Merleau-Ponty claims “saved” human beings. Natanson writes that the real task of phenomenology is to acknowledge and study both the present and the absent, the said and the silent: “We are surprised or amazed by a secret door but take it for granted that there is the rest of the room. It is by making the ‘rest of the room’ an amazement that we can secure its singular secrecy” (52). Only by drawing the silent and withheld into the moment experience is constituted in language can the thing perceived become truly itself.

The Phenomenology of Horizontal Signification

One of the exciting things about a consideration of silence within language is all the space (literally and figuratively) it allows for users to “fill in the silence,” to make some poetic noise, as it were. The more startling the silences, the more exciting the creation becomes. And it is within these startling silences that this Language Writing enacts the epoché that defamiliarizes the very process by which meaning is created. Language Writing does not examine *what* is intended, but the intention itself. That is, rather than surprising us with very real emotions connected to imaginary characters, as fiction does,⁸ poetry of this sort can surprise us with commonplace words whose very commonality is rejected through disruptions of language’s most

⁸ The fictive, Natanson argues, forces us to consider what it really means for there to be a distinction between the real and the imaginary (31).

basic—or, rather, normalized—structures. This sort of epoché depends on language that performs unexpected jumps, creates previously unimagined relationships, and thus establishes new contexts for what may have been thought of as firmly entrenched intended realities. To put it another way, such language does not function in a purely communicative, referential mode in which clarity of intended meaning is an important priority. According to Charles Bernstein, language that serves a primarily communicative purpose is fundamentally closed, allowing for a strictly limited set of interpretive possibilities:

Sentences that follow standard grammatical patterns allow the accumulating references to enthrall the reader by diminishing diversions from a constructed representation. In this way, each word's references work in harmony by reinforcing a spatio-temporal order conventionalized by the bulk of writing practice that creates the 'standard.' 'The lamp sits atop the table in the study'—each word narrowing down the possibilities of each other, limiting the interpretation of each word's meaning by creating an ever more specific context.

(Bernstein 116)

Such language, which signifies on a strictly referential level, tends to lull its users (speakers, writers, hearers, readers) into a sense of security, that security arising out of an enclosed pen that limits the possibility for either excursion or intrusion. It relies on differentiation almost exclusively, the deliberate separating of one possible meaning from another and the subsequent valorizing of the “truest,” the “most meaningful,” the most “factually correct.” Take, for example, Bernstein's rather straightforward sentence above: “The lamp sits atop the table in the study.” Bernstein claims that sentences like this one create a moment in language of limited interpretation. Were we to ask someone what this sentence was “about,” what the words referred

to, that person would surely say something about a lamp on a table in a study. The sentence signifies a specific situation within the spatio-temporal world (or an imagined version of that world) that can be understood empirically. If the sentence had been written in response to a cow next to a grain silo, then the sentence—which includes the definitions of the words, the relationships created between those definitions—would be wrong, untrue.⁹ That is, the sentence would not correspond correctly to the “real world.” Bruce Andrews argues that this mode of language usage insists upon a depth of meaning achieved through “choicelessness; a lower layer that is nature-like in its immobility or fixity or self-evidence” (Andrews, “Text and Context” 32). In addition, choicelessness functions outside of time and rejects absolutely the idea of the possible. If I have no choice, then I have no way of imagining anything other than what is already in front of me. I am bound thereby to the stasis of actuality, rendered immobile without the frothing mobility of possibility. Further, if there is no choice of future possibilities, then language itself ceases to function, for language depends upon there always being a choice as to what word will follow the previous word. The rejection of choice is also, then, a rejection of the possibility of change and the imaginary, restricting intentional consciousness only to the “actual.” Further, it rejects utterly the absent, the unknown, thus limiting human beings to what they already know at present. I want to return for a moment, then, to Merleau-Ponty’s claim that what “saves” human beings within their limited scope is a fundamental “openness to *something*. What saves us is the possibility of a new development, and our power of making even what is false true—by thinking through our errors and replacing them with the domain of truth” (21). In rejecting the openness of language, then, we close ourselves off from the possibility that our

⁹ It would not, however, be without aesthetic value. Scalapino, in fact, plays around with the idea of the *non sequitur* as a (dis)ordering system: perceived randomness actually creates space for an infinite variety of connections and meanings to be made. See pages 129-131 of chapter 3 for a discussion of this. The point, though, is that the disjunction of ways of meaning here do not line up with the limitations of “realist” language and its perceived correspondence to “reality.”

errors may eventually turn into truth, though that truth may be beyond our present understanding. Ultimately, a rejection of unlimited choice in language destroys the future in favor of the present moment.

Stanley Deetz argues, like Merleau-Ponty, that insisting upon a closed language that corresponds directly to the world is inconsistent with human possibility. Deetz calls language that is forced to do little more than point at things “derivative,” noting that to employ language simply as a “tool” to point at objects is to alienate human beings from their very mode of experiencing the world as a continuous site of possibility and change: “These views seem inadequate to describe the formative human experiences of coming to see a thing in a new way or our understanding of the dissimilar experiences of another made available in language” (Deetz 41). Insisting upon language that corresponds with an already existing worldview, then, is to insist upon the impossibility of new meanings, new truths, entering into our understanding of the world, leading to the same sort of stagnation that occurs in closed, immobile pools of water. Language that allows space for these new truths to emerge, then, is open language, valuing instead of denigrating change. It is in this possibility of change that human beings, through language, are free to make their own meaning out of the world: “For man to realize his freedom he must not only be a language-user but must listen to language.” That is, man must listen not just to what people say, but to the language itself “and the way it leads” (Standish 154).

To further explore this understanding of language as an open, nebulous system whose openness is necessary for evolving interpretations of the world, I’d like to quote in full a passage from Lyn Hejinian’s “The Rejection of Closure,” a talk she gave in San Francisco in 1983. Hejinian’s description of this rejection, which in turn welcomes and makes explicit openness in

language, illustrates the way that language can function as a site of possibility without automatically morphing into a vast chaos of undifferentiated reality:

In the gap between what one wants to say (or what one perceives there is to say) and what one can say (what is sayable), words provide for a collaboration and a desertion. We delight in our sensuous involvement with the materials of language, we long to join words to the world—to close the gap between ourselves and things, and we suffer from doubt and anxiety as to our capacity to do so because of the limits of language itself.

Yet the very incapacity of language to match the world allows it to do service as a medium of differentiation. The undifferentiated is one mass, the differentiated is multiple. The (unimaginable) complete text, the text that contains everything, would be in fact a closed text. It would be insufferable.

For me, a central activity of poetic language is formal. In being formal, in making form distinct, it opens—makes variousness and multiplicity and possibility articulate and clear. While failing in the attempt to match the world, we discover structure, distinction, the integrity and separateness of things. (285)

I'd like to highlight Hejinian's use of the word "insufferable" to describe the idea of a "complete" text that says everything there is to say about the world because the language within that text corresponds to the world exactly. Such a completion leaves no room for the possibility of change and thus no room for the gradual coming-to-understanding that Merleau-Ponty and Deetz describe as integral to human experience of the world. That is, the meaning-making, creative aspect of being human is located precisely in our language's utter inability to get at the

world so completely as to render language itself unnecessary. We cannot say the world completely, but we can—and do—try.

Let us return, then, to Bernstein's lamp and the sentence that does little more than describe a particular arrangement of molecules in the world: "The lamp sits atop the table in the study." And let us open up the possibilities of a sentence written in response to this hypothetical lamp. Gertrude Stein, from *Tender Buttons*: "A lamp is not the only sign of glass" (466). Sentences like this do not function, in Bruce Andrews' words, on a vertical axis of signification, the axis of depth and choicelessness. In other words, each word following the previous does not narrow down the possibilities of meaning until a very limited set of meanings is reached. Stein's lamp does not "sit," it just "is." In addition, Stein's lamp does not refer to a specific lamp out in the world, it being yet another "sign," and a sign of glass. Sentences like Stein's function on a horizontal axis, "without an insistent (that is to say, imposed) depth....[Meaning is] not latent, but quite handsomely manifest" (Andrews, "Text and Context" 33). (I would caution, however, against assuming that manifest meaning is obvious meaning. The meaning of Stein's sentence is in no way obvious.) When the jump into horizontal signification occurs, meaning in sentences stretches out along paths that open up as they go.¹⁰ We no longer reach deeper and deeper into what has become a narrow cavern of Truth, but rather have extended outward into an ever

¹⁰ It should be noted here that Andrews' conception of horizontal signification as the mode which expands possibilities instead of limiting them in a way revises the axis of signification offered by Roman Jakobson (cited in Hartley 77). Jakobson described the vertical paradigmatic axis of signification as that which laid out all the possible connotations and meanings for a given signifier. Jakobson's vertical axis, like Andrews', is the axis of limitation—definition, connotation, finite meaning. The horizontal axis, or the syntagmatic axis, is the axis of relations, where the relations between words within a given sentence establish the possibilities of what a word can mean within that same sentence. Andrews' horizontal signification—which opens the possibilities of meaning up into a vast field instead of a narrow cavern—expands the possibilities of Jakobson's horizontal signification beyond simple, daily conversation and into avant-garde poetry. As Hartley writes, "It is the achievement of many Language poets to think beyond the stalemate of the paradigmatic question and to pose poetry as an exploration of the syntagmatic, as a question of the power of frames and, by extension...of ideology)" (77). Both still examine the relations between words, but Andrews' concept is more about what happens when those relations no longer make sense within previously established paradigms of meanings.

receding limit of what can be said and what can be true of being. We thus actively resist the normalizing impulse of referential signification: “Normalization gives way to significance, an eroticism, a multi-dimensional tissue or weave of signs by which any apparent subject is produced. Writing, as *infinite* association, explodes the definitions, endistances origins (or Origin), rejects closure, *exempts* meaning. The vise of the signified is unhinged; simplistic notions of truth are relativized” (Andrews, “Code Words” 54). Thus, when the progression of one word to another is less a path that narrows steadily with each step forward, and more a dance around an infinitely open field of possibilities, the meanings created by the participants in that language become part of a vibrant search for possible understanding instead of a more oppressive shackling to one previously determined absolute truth.

Stein, Hejinian and Scalapino: Intersubjectivity and Autobiography

My study of autobiographical works by Stein, Hejinian and Scalapino will focus on the phenomenological moves I see happening in each of their texts, and will be guided by the authors’ particular use of silence and absence to create the self in text.

In my chapter on Stein’s *Stanzas in Meditation*, I examine the role that pronouns play in the text, pronouns whose antecedents (the “substantive” parts of language) are conspicuously absent. My argument will suggest that by turning these “gaps” into the most significant parts of her text, Stein’s poem becomes accessible to readers as their *own* autobiography. In this way, Stein’s text truly paves the way for the revolutionary poetics so valued by the late-century Language poets who took her as their progenitor, in that the reader changes from a passive recipient of already complete meaning to an active creator of continually shifting and growing meanings. By couching this creative revolution in autobiographical terms, *Stanzas in Meditation*

establishes an intersubjective space in which author and reader intend each other as fully creative subjects.

My chapter on Lyn Hejinian's *My Life* focuses on the dearth of logical, instead of grammatical, antecedents in her autobiographical poem. The lack of logical continuity in a poem that is much more explicitly autobiographical than Stein's *Stanzas* creates an image of a self in the process of being created, a self whose complexity in a way emerges out of the text as from a field of possibilities. I argue in this chapter that Hejinian's poem enacts an eidetic reduction (Husserl's term), meaning that her autobiography is in fact an exploration of what it means to have a life to write about at all. In this way, her "life" and "self" become simply a possible "life" and "self."

My third chapter, which explores Leslie Scalapino's two texts *Zither & Autobiography* and *The Return of Painting, The Pearl, and Orion: A Trilogy*, is truly an examination of silence. In it I examine the ways in which Scalapino recreates the self as action instead of entity, something she accomplishes through a vision of self as *appositional*. I argue that she is able to do this through her claim that "the comic book is the self." Specifically, the format of the comic book, with its juxtaposition of spaces of presence and spaces of absence, foregrounds the way the self is created through multiple, moving interactions. I will employ comic book theory about the relationship between those different types of spaces to explore the role the reader plays in recognizing, developing and creating selves as action.

The argument I put forward in this dissertation is that autobiographical poetry that rejects easy description, reliance on memory, and, ultimately, Lejeune's autobiographical pact, reframes the entire concept of *autobiography*. Instead of being "about the author," it becomes "about the process of creating a self." In so doing, the selves of the readers become just as vital to the

autobiographical process as the self of the author, and those two are able to meet in these texts in what I will argue are intersubjective ways. When language relies on its silences, its gaps, its outright *refusal* to say the world, it reinforces our own creativity and liberates our sense of self from preconceived definitions and limitations. Language Writing truly allows moments of *community* to become moments of vibrant, intersubjective *self*-creation. True *presence* of one to the other—of me to you, of the reader to the writer—becomes possible through the *absences* of these texts.

Chapter 1: “‘She will be me when this you see’: *Stanzas in Meditation* and the Intersubjective Creation of Autobiography”

“Words have to do everything,” Gertrude Stein wrote in her 1934 lecture “Poetry and Grammar” (published in *Lectures in America*, p. 209). In the essay, Stein outlines a taxonomy of parts of speech. Instead of sticking to grammar-school definitions of pronouns, verbs, and adjectives, she provides a markedly subjective assessment of each of them. In particular, she is interested in the degree to which each part supports the excitement of creative human potential. Richard Bridgman explains that Stein had a lifelong obsession with the role individual words played in her writing (as opposed to the role of imagery, metaphor, rhythm or other poetic techniques).¹¹ As far back as her college essays, he writes, she “had found it difficult to construct coherent paragraphs, to sustain a tone, an idiomatic level, or an idea. She therefore consistently defended the virtues of the fragmentary perception, uniquely expressed” (199), an idea that should come as no surprise to readers of her autobiographical poem *Stanzas in Meditation* (written in 1932, though not published until 1956). Written just before the American lecture tour for which she wrote “Poetry and Grammar,” the book-length poem relies greatly on what I shall broadly call “function words,” words whose role in a sentence is not to signify a precise thing, concept or action, but rather to move the sentence along by establishing relationships between other, more solid concepts. The opening lines of Part III provide a useful example of how Stein employs these types of words:

For which can they it which

That they can then or there either

¹¹ Stein’s emphasis on the vibrancy of individual words is, in my mind, at the heart of her particular brand of American Modernism, which is constituted in part by a profound rejection of the past. Within this creative revolution was possibility in new meanings, new relations—in short, it was a revolution of the possible.

By means of it for which they could

Recognise it is more than in going (III, i)¹²

In these four lines, “recognise,” “means” and “going” are the only words that signify with any sort of precision, exemplifying perfectly the type of work the poem asks its readers to perform: we must make sense of the “transitive” elements of language without the benefit of the “substantive” stopping off points.¹³ Because the poem depends so much on these transitory elements of language, its perpetual movement makes a traditional summary of the text difficult, there being no “events” along the way to serve as landmarks. The poem’s fluidity allows for readings that do not follow chronology or plot, and because of this, and because I will argue for a reader-centered mode of creation, I will not be using the progression of the book from the first to the last page to guide my analysis. Instead, I will read and interpret the poem along a trajectory of my own devising.¹⁴

Stanzas in Meditation is not only experimental *as poetry*; in fact, it is experimental as *Steinian* poetry. When she defines poetry in “Poetry and Grammar,” she focuses her definition on nouns, writing that “Poetry is concerned with using with abusing, with losing with wanting, with denying with avoiding with adoring with replacing the noun. ... Poetry is doing nothing but using losing refusing and pleasing and betraying and caressing nouns” (*LIA* 231). Taking these descriptions of poetry quite seriously, scholarly treatment of Steinian grammar has often focused

¹² Throughout my chapter, I will follow Ulla B. Dydo and cite lines using the Part and Stanza numbers.

¹³ For a fuller discussion of the transitive and substantive parts of language according to William James, please see page 27 of my introductory chapter.

¹⁴ In this regard, I am acknowledging the fundamental “openness” of *Stanzas in Meditation*. In defining open texts, Lyn Hejinian, with echoes of Eco in *The Role of the Reader*, writes that “[a]ny reading of these works is an improvisation; one moves through the work not in straight lines but in curves, swirls, and across intersections, to words that catch the eye or attract attention repeatedly” (“Rejection of Closure” 44). Hejinian acknowledges Eco’s influence on her ideas, and the similarities are explored much more fully on page 110 in my next chapter.

on her eroticization of nouns in *Tender Buttons*.¹⁵ *Stanzas*, however, loses, refuses and betrays nouns in very different ways. In particular, Stein fills the poem with *pronouns* for which she refuses to provide identifiable antecedents. On the sentence level, this contextual refusal obviously creates a confusing series of gaps, or signified absences, which forces—or, perhaps, allows—readers to construct new methods of meaning-making as they read *Stanzas*. On a broader level, the lack of sentence-level antecedents problematizes the antecedent to the entire autobiographical enterprise: Stein herself. The loss of Stein as antecedent here seems on some level to indicate a remarkable lack of self-esteem: “Gertrude Stein” is the noun that is used, abused, and betrayed. Scholarly treatment of *Stanzas* has often approached the poem in this pessimistic way, aligning it with the identity crisis many saw the author undergoing in the 1930s (which I explain in more detail below). I propose, however, a more positive interpretation of this “betrayal.” In my reading of *Stanzas*, a reading that employs a phenomenological lens, the refusal of the noun as antecedent allows author and reader to meet in the text as equally *possible* antecedents, thus creating, I argue, a unique relationship of intersubjectivity, as both reader and writer are able to “stand in” as the antecedent for the “I.”

In *The Geographical History of America*, in which Stein argues for the value of the “human mind” over “human nature,” the former being that which allows us to get in “contact” with the world around us, Stein claims that writing that can be called a “master-piece” is writing that rejects memory and history in favor of a real, authentic presence: “All the writing that is the human mind does not consist in messages or in events it consists only in writing down what is written and therefore it has no relation to human nature. Events are connected with human nature but they are not connected with the human mind and therefore all the writing that has to do with

¹⁵ For examples of this kind of criticism, see studies of *Tender Buttons* by Gass, DeKoven (1986) and Murphy.

events has to be written over, but the writing that has to do with writing does not have to be written again, again is in this sense the same as over” (116). If anything can be said about *Stanzas in Meditation*, it is that the poem decidedly rejects these “events” that “have to be written over.” This signifying gap is so constructed in the poem as to make it difficult to “fill in” with cultural, ideological or historical analysis,¹⁶ though, as I’ll explore later on, many have tried. By ridding the poem of most of those antecedents that connect readers to events from Stein’s life, she pushes us instead toward the “writing that has to do with writing.” Thus the poem, or, rather, what is absent from it—clearly narrated events from the author’s life—need not be viewed as a lack or as a puzzle.

Stein divides parts of speech into two main categories: those whose function supports the potential of human creativity and those whose function limits human creativity. According to Stein, the former are active, “lively” words, while the latter are generally passive, offering the writer and reader little in the way of new perspectives on the world. The more exciting a part of speech is, the more the user “will always have the pleasure that using something that is varied and alive can give” (*LIA* 213). She goes on to assert, “Verbs and adverbs and articles and conjunctions and prepositions are lively because they all do something and as long as anything does something it keeps alive” (*LIA* 214). Nouns, in Stein’s mind, resist possibility and action in that they do little more than name a thing, and “[i]f it is adequate then why go on calling it” (*LIA* 210). Pronouns, however, embody the possibility that Stein found so important. She writes, “[T]hey of course are not really the name of anything. They represent some one but they are not

¹⁶ I do not of course mean to suggest that one can ever rid oneself of ideological influences during any encounter with another human being. In fact, in an effort to “save” phenomenology for the contemporary world, Johanna Oksala suggests that instead of examining the world at large as constituted in one’s individual consciousness, phenomenologists should instead begin at the community level, analyzing the structures that allow individuals to call something “normal” or not. By contrast, I see *Stanzas in Meditation* as Stein’s attempt to distill these moments down to their most primordial units, which she accomplishes by ridding the poem of the normal clues that would shape an ideological belief-structure.

its or his name. In not being his or its or her name they already have a greater possibility of being something than if they were as a noun is the name of anything” (*LIA* 213-4). Stein does not devote much specific attention to pronouns in “Poetry and Grammar.” However, her emphasis on the sense of “possibility” that they offer aligns them with the “active” and “lively” parts of speech she values, since “possibility” implies the sort of active reaching into the unknown that she found so exhilarating.

In her bountiful use of personal pronouns, Stein asks readers to navigate a prolonged series of absences and yet provides readers with very little guidance on how to complete that project. Philippe Lejeune, using the work of Emile Benveniste, similarly emphasizes that pronouns serve a *function* in language rather than referring to a specific *concept* (Lejeune 10). That is, one cannot actually “define” the word “he” or “it” in the same way one can define “police officer” or “table.” In order for a pronoun to function within a sentence, there must be an antecedent to which the pronoun refers. Pronouns, then, actually function as a marker of absence twice removed, in that, while words like nouns and verbs signify the presence of a concept but the absence of the thing itself (the word “table” instead of the collection of molecules on which the dinner plates are set), pronouns signify the absence of the filled absence, a sort of black hole of signification. Stein actually deals with this idea in the poem itself when, in Stanza X of Part III, she writes,

What is the difference.

What is the difference both between for it and it

And also more also before not it

It can be an absence better than not before. (III, x)

Is the “before” of these lines Stein’s earlier poetry, which, as in *Tender Buttons*, brimmed over with nouns? The “it and it” demonstrates how far removed we are from such abundance. What, for example, happens when we make the “it” more personal? What is the difference between I and I, between she and we, between they and me, when there is no antecedent (grammatical or actual) to fill the absence? These pronouns, I argue, allow Stein to imagine the self as permeable to the point of loss, so that the boundaries between the “I” and the “you/she/he/they” risk total dissolution. Despite the danger embedded in this process, this seemingly self-destructive version of intersubjectivity—in which the perceiving, writing subject is so welcoming of other subjects that her own subjectivity is nearly destroyed—gives Stein a chance to explore some issues of identity that would preoccupy her in much of her later writings.¹⁷ In 1934, following the wild success of *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, Stein and Toklas traveled to America for a national lecture tour. The tour itself was as successful as the book had been, and Stein returned to France a bona-fide celebrity. Following the return, however, Stein became troubled by her sudden fame, frustrated that the book that had garnered this attention had been written not for herself but for readers. Jean Mills and Elizabeth Winston both argue, for example, that because of this sudden celebrity Stein felt as if she were no longer the one who observes (as we know her in *Tender Buttons* and her many portraits), but the one who is observed. We might render this phenomenologically as a shift from subjecthood to objecthood, a shift that occurs because of Stein being so suddenly forced into an uncomfortable and public encounter with unknown masses of readers. S. C. Neuman proposes that Stein coped with this discomfort by tightening the focus of her poetry so narrowly that the outside world and its relationships were actually

¹⁷ *The Geographical History of America* (1936) and *Everybody’s Autobiography* (1937) offer these types of exploration.

discarded, thus giving readers fewer tools by which to construct an identity for her.¹⁸ In general, then, critics have themselves constructed an identity for 1930s Stein: a timid, insecure author plagued by writer's block and unable to develop a stable sense of herself.¹⁹ *Stanzas*, however, offers a subversively powerful alternative to this image.²⁰

Written just before the *Autobiography* and thus before the possibility of celebrity ever emerged, Stein's book-length and marginally autobiographical poem *Stanzas in Meditation* opens up a space for thinking about these questions apart from exclusively biographical interpretations. Ulla B. Dydo and others (such as Mills and Winston)²¹ have shown that Stein's relationship with her primary reader, Toklas, changed around the time she wrote *Stanzas*, heavily coloring any reading of the poem by one familiar with Stein's life, but the facts of that relationship need not provide the only interpretive frame. As an alternative, I want to look at the poem through pronoun-colored glasses, considering how it is that such an insignificant part of

¹⁸ Neuman does not actually reference *Stanzas* in his 1979 book *Gertrude Stein: Autobiography and the Problem of Narration*, though his argument is incredibly prescient in the face of this lack. Had he written following Ulla B. Dydo's influential work on *Stanzas* in the mid-1980s, there is little doubt he would have addressed the poem.

¹⁹ Timothy Galow argues that in *Everybody's Autobiography*, written after the trip to America, Stein employs illogic and contradiction as a way to prevent herself from being subsumed into the celebrity culture of the 1930s, a culture that would have defined her identity for her, while Kirk Curnutt argues that she actually participated in this culture precisely by refusing to be defined by it, "authenticity" being a celebrity trend during the thirties. Kari Lokke, in comparing Stein's autobiographical writing to that of Dorothy Wordsworth, proposes that Stein effaced herself in her writing as a way to avoid being defined by her audience, a move that Julia Fawcett sees occurring frequently in Stein's dramatic writings. Barbara Mossberg paints the reader/writer relationship in a sinister tone, arguing that Stein actually strove to deceive her readers so that readers had fewer opportunities to know and thus define her identity.

²⁰ Can Gertrude Stein read the future? *Stanzas* was written *before* Stein became an international celebrity. Curiously, we find the following lines at the conclusion of Part Three: "I often think how celebrated I am. / It is difficult not to think how celebrated I am. / And if I think how celebrated I am / They know who know that I am new / That is I knew I know how celebrated I am / And after all it astonishes even me" (III, xxiv).

²¹ Mills and Winston must be read cautiously, however, considering that Dydo's revision and correction of her own archival work had not yet been published. I discuss Dydo's revisions on pp. 67-68 in this chapter.

speech could so radically shape the fruitfulness of a relationship between self and other, “I” and “you,” “I” and “they.”

Language and Intersubjectivity in Stein’s Writing

The radical version of intersubjectivity I see in *Stanzas*, in which the boundaries between the “I” and the “not-I” are dissolved, emerges out of lines like the following from stanza VIII of Part III: “It is very anxious not to know the name of them / But they know not theirs but mine. / Not theirs but mine.” (VIII, iiiii). The anxiety articulated in these lines—the anxiety of the perpetually unnamed subject(s)—will frame the entire poem. First, the phrase “It is very anxious” presumes an “I” for whom the situation of not knowing “their” name produces anxiety, and yet the phrase also suggests that the “I” is already part of a community in which this anxiety is shared (in the same way that “it is cold” signifies a different sort of meaning from “I am cold,” the former signifying a shared instead of exclusively personal experience). Thus the absent yet simultaneously present “I” is immediately part of a community of “they” who, because we have no limiting guidelines—such as names—could be anyone and everyone. Interestingly, “they” in these lines do not have “names”; rather, they have a singular “name,” indicating that the anxiety is also that of an individual faced with a singular mass or crowd. The second line extends this anxiety in part by an ambiguous use of the conjunction “but,” which usually is used to indicate information that is contrary in some way to what has already come. Instead, what we get is an “also” sort of statement: they *also* do not know “theirs”—their name. Do they thus share in the same anxiety of the unknown names? What do they know? They know mine. The “I” here loses power in that the “I” is known by other subjects and thereby becomes an object of knowledge.

And yet, though the second line indicates that “my” name is known, *that name is also never named*, so that we as readers must share in the anxiety of the “I”: we know no names.²²

Though the above lines could easily be read as the anxiety of an author uncomfortable with her relationship with her mass of readers, *Stanzas* was written *before* the celebrity of the *Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* and thus at a time when her dedicated readers were few and far between. The temptation to read Stein into the anxious “I” is strong, as it provides us as readers an anchor to which we can tie our interpretations, interpretations that can and will flounder amid the overabundance of transitive language. And yet, the “I” is left unnamed in the same way that “they” is left unnamed, thus rejecting the information necessary to distinguish the one from the other. We have only our faith in pronouns to guide us here, and Stein has begun to destroy that faith through her rejection of the grammatical antecedent.

One of the options readers of *Stanzas* have for dealing with the anxiety of the nameless is to develop new ways of “filling in” the gap of these lost antecedents. Stein supports such innovative reading, and in fact occasionally provides instructions on how to deal with the unnamed: “See how one thing can mean another,” she writes. “Not another one no not any not another one” (IV, xi). The first sentence here offers a clue about the text, suggesting that meaning is entirely fluid, that we can pile meanings of these words on top of each other in any way we wish. The very next line, though, expresses the anxiety that such a project entails: one thing can mean another in this poem, but not that thing, or that one, or that one. Despite the hesitation, however, the two sentences lack the stability of a stable antecedent. “One” could mean anything, really, so that the exciting interpretive space offered in the first line is actually

²² A few pages before this passage, Stein does suddenly provide a series of proper nouns. The way she deals with these names, however, indicates their problematic insertion in the poem: “I think very well of Susan but I do not know her name” (67). “Susan” as a noun is incredibly turned into a pronoun, meaning nothing more than “her.”

supported by its own near negation in the second: “one thing” and “another” and “not another one” all lead back to the same gap in signification, so that difference is remade as sameness. The anxious “I,” though, must tread carefully. Allowing “one” to be the same as “another one” is hardly worth fretting over. No identity is lost, no self is sacrificed. A few pages later, though, in Stanza XIV, one thing meaning another becomes much more potently sacrificial: “She will be me when this you see. / And steadily or whether will they compel / Which is what I tell now” (IV, xiv). What is told here is the blending of she into me, a fusion of existences that is somehow brought about by a seeing “you” and a compelling “they.” These lines indicate the terror of the loss of subjectivity when one is confronted by an equally powerful other, a subject powerful in its own right. She becomes me, I become her. This fusion of subjectivities is, in my reading, the moment of intersubjectivity. The reader is the “you,” so that for the briefest of moments, Stein welcomes us into the text, allowing us to participate, to share in her anxiety. And if this is indeed the case, the reader becomes a full subject within the text.

Intersubjectivity is not an entirely new concept among scholars of Stein’s work. Laurel Bollinger neatly articulates the issue I see Stein wrestling with throughout *Stanzas*: language that privileges the speaking subject “contains no language to express the experiences of the object, nor even to theorize what such a language might entail” (229). Bollinger’s approach to this issue is Freudian in origin, though she eventually rejects both Freud and Lacan in favor of Kristeva, arguing for a motherly (inter)subjectivity, in which “one self enfolds and is enfolded by the other self. Through the womblike parentheses, [the term] offer us as partial metaphor the infant *in utero*: wholly constituted by the (m)other, so wholly same, yet wholly different” (231). In an analysis of “Patriarchal Poetry,” Bollinger claims that Stein reconfigures the traditional elevation of self over other by fusing together the pronouns “she” and “I,” thus proposing “an alternate

form of identity in which the self is always connected to another self: (inter)subjectivity” (239). In Bollinger’s assessment, though, even if the “I” exists in an always already there relation to an other, difference is maintained. There is self, there is other, and never the twain shall meet (no matter how cozy the two may become). Like many Stein critics, Bollinger never allows the historical person of Gertrude Stein to stray too far from her reading, a move that I claim limits the possibilities of interpretation of her works to biographical readings. *Stanzas in Meditation* calls that practice into question, since, as I explained above, Stein the person does not fit easily into the role of autobiographical antecedent in this text filled with self-referential pronouns. Instead of utilizing a Freudian intersubjectivity, which tends to draw us back to historical biography again and again, I call upon Edmund Husserl’s definition of the term,²³ which will allow us to consider instead the play back and forth between the various and many unknown subjectivities welcomed into conversation through the openness of the “I.”

In the fifth meditation of his *Cartesian Meditations*, Husserl attempts to “save” his phenomenology—in particular his idea of the transcendental subject—from the charge of solipsism that he anticipates will be laid against him. To do so, he develops his idea of intersubjectivity as a way to reconcile the transcendental subject, in whose intentional consciousness the world is constituted, with the presence of other transcendental subjects who also intend and constitute the world. He writes: “In changeable harmonious multiplicities of experience I experience others as actually existing and, on the one hand, as world Objects...they are ‘in the world.’ On the other hand, I experience them at the same time as *subjects for this*

²³ As I argued in my introductory chapter, language writing, of which Stein is considered a progenitor, benefits from a phenomenological reading in that phenomenology exposes and critiques those basic mental structures that human beings use to organize, categorize and constitute the world at large. *Stanzas in Meditation* particularly is illuminated through such a reading because it resists at every turn attempts at historicization, thus opening up critical space for a discussion of its processes of phenomenological intentionality instead of authorial *meaning*.

world, as experiencing it (this same world that I experience) and, in so doing, experiencing me too, even as I experience the world and others in it” (91, emphasis in original). Intersubjectivity, then, is a way of describing the encounter between two intending consciousnesses, or, in Husserl’s vocabulary, two fully transcendental subjects. *Stanzas* seems particularly welcoming of this concept because of its perpetual confusion of the “I” (subject) with various other pronouns, both those that indicate “others” (they, she, it, you) and those that explicitly contain the “I” (we, us, me). A blending of subjective and objective experience in the meeting of multiple intending consciousnesses becomes, in Stein’s poem, an intersubjective meeting.

Husserl uses the concept of intersubjectivity to explore the ways in which unique subjects intend and constitute each other. Though he originally argues for subjects as transcendent and monadic, he will ultimately posit that these seemingly isolated individuals experience full communion with each other: “*Something that exists is in intentional communion with something else that exists*. It is an essentially *unique connectedness*, an actual community and precisely the one that makes transcendently possible the being of a world, a world of men and things” (129, emphasis in original). If we consider this “world” here in the Heideggerian sense of being composed of the relationships between beings, then Husserl is suggesting that it is through mutual intentionality—my intention of you and your unique consciousness within my own and your mirrored intention of the same—that allows for these world-making relationships to exist at all. Intersubjectivity is, then, such a mutual intending. Part of Husserl’s theory of intersubjectivity depended on a “pairing” of the individual subjects based on similar features, a process he called an “apperceptive transfer” or “appresentation.” This appresentation, according to Alfred Schutz, “is a special form of mediate intentionality, the essence of which is that—in connection with a presentation[,], one that is a genuine self-presentation of an A—there is

effected a co-presentation of a B (the ‘appresented’) that itself never comes to actual presentation but is continually interwoven with something perceived in self-presentation, the A” (Schutz, “The Problem” 62). Basically, through the activity of appresentation, the ego-subject of the Other (“B” in Schutz’s example) does not independently present itself to the original ego-subject (“A”) as existing fully outside A’s consciousness, but is rather appresented, in that it is intended within the original perceiving consciousness *as one who also intends*. And though Schutz will argue that these subjects can not be considered simultaneously intersubjective and transcendental,²⁴ the material fact remains that human experience depends on this very intersubjectivity and what Schutz calls the “we-relationship”: “The possibility of reflection on the self, discovery of the ego...and the possibility of all communication and of establishing a communicative surrounding world as well, are founded on the primal experience of the we-relationship” (Schutz, “The Problem” 82).²⁵

The implications of this necessary “we-relationship” for a writer like Stein are important, as Stein was frequently resistant to the idea of tying any aspect of self to others around her. Such an opening up of the self into multitudes was obviously a risky move on Stein’s part, especially because her sense of self had become increasingly fragile in the 1930s. Her insecurity was articulated most openly in “What Are Master-Pieces And Why Are There So Few of Them” (written 1935, published in 1940) and *The Geographical History of America or the Relation of Human Nature to the Human Mind* (written 1935, published in 1936), both written after *Stanzas*. In these two texts, Stein articulates her understanding of the difference between human nature

²⁴ Phenomenologists following Husserl have dismissed the idea of transcendent subject for many reasons, including the simple idea, from Merleau-Ponty, that all subjects are bodily subjects and thus always already imminent. I argue, however, that the idea of intersubjectivity as explored by Husserl and then explained by Schutz is a valuable concept despite its perhaps flawed opening propositions.

²⁵ It is interesting to note that, grammatically, the easiest way to pull separate individuals—John and Mary and Sue and Gertrude and Alice—into full communion with each other is through pronouns—we and they and us.

(identity) and the human mind (entity). In Stein's understanding of the terms, human nature, from which we derive our identity, depends on an audience of sorts, but also on a person's memory. By extension, then, identity and human nature depend on historical situation—what one remembers about oneself and one's culture and what others remember about oneself. In *Geographical History*, Stein articulates the danger of dwelling too much on the human nature side of the binary, especially when writing:

Perhaps to remember what identity does and if identity remembers them it has nothing to do with the human mind no nothing because the human mind does not remember it knows and writes what it knows.

Now identity remembers and so it has an audience and as it has an audience it is history and as it is history it has nothing to do with the human mind.

The little dog knows that I am I because he knows me but that is not because of identity but because he believes what he sees and what he hears and what he smells and so that is really superstition and not identity because superstition is true while identity is history and history is not true because history is dependent on an audience.

Oh yes oh yes upon an audience. (147)

The major distinction she offers is an historical one: those inside history are subject to the whims of audience, something Stein herself was violently opposed to, having experienced first hand what happens when others offer an identity for oneself (Stein as the author of *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*) that does not align with one's own (Stein as the author of *Tender Buttons* and the portraits and *The Making of Americans*).

As an alternative to the historicized, audience-bound human nature, Stein offers her concept of the human mind: ahistorical, independent of the whims of audience, utterly creative. Stein claims that writing, if it is to produce masterpieces, comes from the human mind, in part because the human mind is not dependent on memory and is thus able to work outside of time: “Writing for the human mind has no beginning middle or end. Having a beginning, middle and end requires a person to remember and remembering is not part of the human mind” (*GHA* 150-1). A book like *Stanzas* assuredly falls into the category of writing produced by the human mind, in part because it *does* reject beginnings, middles, and ends. It rejects summarization and thus containment within another person’s words. The lack of history—both within and without a text—leads, in Lyn Hejinian’s words, to a focus on the “flat” elements of daily life: “perception of this flatness is a virtue, a creative property of what [Stein] identified as the ‘human mind’; unlike human nature, the human mind perceives without memory—it sees flat—and by virtue of this it composes masterpieces” (Hejinian, “A Common Sense” 359). Amid this flatness, writes Bollinger, only the object remains: “The masterpiece arises from the state of mind of the writer, making the writer’s subject matter irrelevant. A masterpiece may talk about identity, but it cannot be written by person in a state of identity. *Entity demands union with the object under consideration, with the individual utterly immersed in the creativity of the moment*” (Bollinger 247, my emphasis). Stein describes such a moment in a 1934 interview with William Lundell, telling the at-times skeptical interviewer that she saw some dead grass at the end of the summer in Paris and could not stop writing “pigeons on the yellow grass, alas” until her emotion—sadness at the dead grass—was emptied out of her (Lundell 95).

I recognize that Stein’s concept of entity, which she developed most fully after *Stanzas* and the trip to America, would seem to contradict the radicalized, permeable intersubjectivity I

see at work in the poem. Entity, in Stein's rendering, is independent of relationships with others since relationships carry with them the danger that someone other than oneself will define, and thus limit, who one is. Stein developed this concept specifically as a remedy to her fear that she would be defined as the author of the *Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* and not as the author of the portraits, *Tender Buttons*, *The Making of Americans*, and her other more "difficult" writings. Yet, the mode of intersubjectivity Stein develops in *Stanzas* combats this danger *not* by avoiding others altogether via a retreat into highly personal or automatic writing (of which Stein has been accused by her detractors²⁶) but rather by welcoming others so completely into one's "primordial sphere" (a term coined by Edmund Husserl) that there is no space left over in which those others can define one's identity.

The remedy to the anxiety of imposed identity lies not in careful and increasingly precise articulation of "who they are" or "who I am." Rather, Stein offers an alternative by shifting the terms of the discussion from what/who is known to who knows. While I see this shift occurring throughout *Stanzas in Meditation*, I'd like to first examine the way she explores such a perceiving consciousness in "Patriarchal Poetry," written in 1927, as the earlier work offers a bit more "substantive" language and thus is a good transition into the more transitive language of *Stanzas*. Two of these passages offer the possibility that only the thinnest line separates that which is perceived from the one who perceives and, further, that the language we use to distinguish the one from the other is rather unreliable:

What is the difference between a fig and an apple. One comes before the other.

What is the difference between a fig and an apple one comes before the other

²⁶ The most significant of these detractors is B. L. Reid, whose 1958 book *Art by Subtraction: A Dissenting Opinion of Gertrude Stein* argues that Stein's rejection of the author/reader relationship coupled with her desire for absolute objectivity in approaching her subject matter, led to Stein as genius/artist becoming the most important element in her works.

what is the difference between a fig and an apple one comes before the other.

(276)

What is the difference between Elizabeth and Edith. She knows. There is no difference between Elizabeth and Edith that she knows. What is the difference.

She knows. There is no difference as she knows. What is the difference between Elizabeth and Edith that she knows. There is the difference between Elizabeth and Edith which she knows. There is she knows a difference between Elizabeth and Edith which she knows. Elizabeth and Edith as she knows. (278)

In part through the persistence of repetition, both of these passages insist upon differences between perceived objects: figs and apples, Elizabeth and Edith. And yet, both simultaneously place the source of that differentiation back within the perceiving consciousness, so that it is a constituted or intentional difference instead of an essential one. The fig comes “before” the apple (or vice versa) only if there is a consciousness to perceive it and to render it as such in language. Similarly, some “she” knows there is a difference (or that there is not a difference) between Elizabeth and Edith, the focus in this passage being more on the “she” who knows than on the “she’s” who are known. In fact, because of the ambiguity of the pronoun, “she” who knows could just as easily refer to Elizabeth or Edith as it could to an external perceiving consciousness, thus obscuring further the difference between knower and known. Though the speaker in these passages insists that there is in fact a clear and unmistakable difference between her terms, she does little beyond declaring the difference to be so. Other than the letters that distinguish the name Edith from the name Elizabeth, the difference is denied to we the readers. Such passages support the argument that Stein’s language works phenomenologically to recreate the world as a function of the poet’s intentional consciousness. At the same time, the ambiguity of the language

welcomes the reader into this process so that the antecedent possibilities begin to reach out of the text, off the page, onto the most explicitly present perceiving consciousness: the reader.

Earlier in “Patriarchal Poetry,” Stein shows how a similar confusion of subject and object can actually liberate the subject from the anxiety of the “we-relationship” so that her entity is kept intact even as her position as subject is rattled. In fact, Stein shows how the concept of “appresentation”—when an intending subject intends another intending subject—can be overturned so that no one’s subjectivity is at risk. She asks, in fact, what it means “to be we. Once” (*PP* 262). Her answer is: “I double you, of course you do. You double me, very likely to be. You double I double I double you double. I double you double me I double you you double me” (*PP* 263). I hear at least two voices in the first two sentences, separated by the commas, the rhyming responses sounding like a game or nursery rhyme or call-and-response. The last two sentences suggest the possibility of multiple voices, though no punctuation confirms this. However, the “you” and the “I” blend together here in that we cannot easily distinguish subject from object and thus cannot know who doubles whom.²⁷ The “I” and “you” pile on top of each other, risking—or inviting—a loss of differentiation. And yet, the risk seems mitigated through the pronouns themselves. When the “I” becomes the “you,” the consciousness that constitutes the other, to use phenomenological terms, simply shifts from here to there and thus, in fact, reconstitutes itself. In this way, becoming “you” allows the “I” to shape its own place in the world. This argument is supported, in fact, by Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s description of the intersubjective moment: “It is thus necessary that, in the perception of another, I find myself in relation with another ‘myself,’ who is, in principle, open to the same truths as I am, in relation to the same being that I am” (17). Though Merleau-Ponty remains a bit ambivalent about the self’s relation with this new self—are they the same “myself” or are they merely “in relation” to each

²⁷ Or, as was suggested to me by Deborah Mix, when the “double you” becomes the W.

other—we see here the possibility that perception of the other can take place in a moment of shared subjectivity, allowing “me” to become object to the “I,” thus liberating “I” from “he/she/they.”

“Patriarchal Poetry” has thus offered us ways in which subjects and objects can be blended so that subjective perception welcomes the object as an active part of the process. As a poem of the human mind, it will reject history and thus Stein herself, which we also see in *Stanzas in Meditation*. *Stanzas* gives readers very little chance to read Stein the historical person into the “I” of the text. The very first word of the poem is “I,” which could suggest a dramatic monologue just as easily as an autobiography. Both of those possibilities, though, would demand an antecedent, whether in or out of the text. None is ever provided, and instead the few lines that follow immediately shake our faith in the “I” by replacing it with the word “they,” a pronoun that suggests both plurality and an other. The first two lines read, “I caught a bird which made a ball / And they thought better of it” (I, i). The phrase “thought better of it” is often a self-directed phrase: I (in the past) did something and then I (in the more recent past) re-evaluated my action (catching a bird and turning it into a ball) and thus thought better of it (benefitting from the knowledge and experience gained during the shift from earlier past to more recent past). But the “I” is not the one thinking better of the “I’s” past actions. Rather, “they” think better of it. Stein has turned a common colloquial phrase into a revision of subjectivity by allowing “others” to take part in a self-reflexive activity. Just as the first line allows a bird to turn into a ball—an indication of the confusion of signifiers to come—the second line allows “I” to turn into “they,” similar to the “doubling” of the “I” and the “you” in “Patriarchal Poetry.” In fact, the “I” that opened the entire book does not return for the rest of the individual stanza; it is replaced exclusively by “they” for nearly three full stanzas. The word “I” does not re-enter the text until

the last few lines of Stanza III, and even there it is in the context of reported dialogue (“She refused to go / Not refused but really said / And do I have to go / Or do I go,” I, iii). The speaking “I” who opened the text finally re-emerges mid-way through Stanza IV. Of course, the lack of antecedents means there is no guarantee that the “I” of Stanza IV is the same as the “I” of Stanza I or that “they” refers to the same group of others throughout. Instead of concerning ourselves with the *identity* of the “I”—with its antecedent—we are asked to concern ourselves with the *function* of the “I” and the way Stein allows it to share jobs with the “they’s” and “she’s” and “it’s” of the text. Just as the “I” and “you” began to shift back and forth on the subject/object spectrum in “Patriarchal Poetry”—I double you double me—the shared roles here are equally affirming: when “I” becomes “they,” the “I” can, in Schutz’s words, appresent itself, thus reclaiming any perceptive autonomy it may have lost.

Criticism of *Stanzas* seems to support my contention that the poem resists identity-based, biographical interpretation, though perhaps unintentionally. Scholarship on the poem has often been as much about Ulla Dydo’s autobiographical reading of it as about anything else. In two articles from 1981 and 1985, Dydo argued that there had been an original text of *Stanzas* that was corrupted by Alice Toklas. Toklas, apparently, had found out about Stein’s past love affair with May Bookstaver and had insisted that all versions of the word “may” be excised from the manuscript. The published version of *Stanzas* was, up until 2010, this so-called “corrupted” version. Following these two articles, many scholars have seemed compelled to fit their readings of the poem into the a narrative of a troubled relationship between Stein and Toklas, a narrative that no doubt led to the portrait of Stein’s insecurity. All these readings must now be held suspect, however, as in her 2003 study of the poem in *The Language That Rises*, Dydo admits that the discovery of new materials in Stein’s archives significantly revises her initial theory (a

mistake she readily admits and admirably corrects). However, she also claims that most attempts at reading *Stanzas* have failed (506), a less-than-gracious pronouncement considering many of these readings took her flawed scholarship as their guiding light. The fact is, many of these readings turned to Dydo as they searched desperately for subject matter, for signification, for the antecedents that *surely* rested somewhere behind it and they and she and he and here and there and I.²⁸ But without definite, static words, like Alice, or pussy, or patriarchal, or masterpieces, what is one to do? Indeed, after more than twenty years of reading and writing about *Stanzas*, after becoming without a doubt *the* expert on the poem, Dydo herself comes to this same conclusion:

To read a stanza [of *Stanzas in Meditation*], we must give up our reading habits, abandon expectations of language behavior, and read aloud word for word, literally, I am tempted to say naively, as if we did not know how to read. Such reading requires enormous effort against all our proud training as readers and writers. For the language in ‘Stanzas’ is constantly in the process of mutation. The effort to follow it cleans out our minds and ears; sometimes it gives us access to virgin territory of the making of poetry itself. (505)

Dydo’s final claim here is one I take very seriously in my reading of the poem.²⁹ By radicalizing intersubjective relations with readers, *Stanzas* functions as a site at which Stein and her readers can meet as equals and share in the beautiful task of poetic creation. When the autobiographical “I” is reduced to an antecedent-free pronoun, emphasizing function over identity, reader and

²⁸ See Loeffelholz, Mills and Winston for examples of these sorts of readings.

²⁹ It is also one of the reasons that I feel comfortable having written this chapter using the 1994 Sun & Moon edition of the poem. The distinction between may and can, May and April, are not germane to my argument. In fact, Dydo’s ideas here are supported by Douglas Messerli, who edited the Sun & Moon edition. He writes, “even as a meditation, Stein’s work is not so much a personal expression of herself and her beliefs—which *The Autobiography* so clearly is—but becomes a meditation not only *about* language but *of* language” (7).

author begin to share in the project of perception. Harriet Chessman gestured toward this idea in her 1989 book *The Public Is Invited to Dance: Representation, the Body, and Dialogue in Gertrude Stein*. Chessman argues that Stein's texts overthrow the hierarchical—and in her argument, explicitly masculine—power the writer has over the reader. In place of this traditional configuration of the human relationships surrounding the reading of a text, Stein offers instead an intimate relationship of equals, the reader becoming “the embracing and kind lover, utterly receptive to the gift of the telling” (Chessman 146). Part of this overtly feminist argument hinges on Stein's revision of the way a passive (feminine) reader receives meaning from an active (masculine) author through the medium of the text. In a wonderful reading of several of Stein's texts (though not *Stanzas*), Chessman demonstrates how Stein diminishes the distinction between the acts of telling/creating and listening/receiving, so much so that the one becomes simultaneous with the other: “Through this intimation of a listener's presence, Stein suggests that the act of creating becomes an act intricately bound up with the act of receiving; the two acts, mysteriously, often appear to occur simultaneously and can no longer be easily distinguished” (148). Further, writes Chessman, “‘Talking’ and ‘telling’ become tropes for a presence that may include actual words in conversation, but that also includes an entire way of being in the world. One listens, not only to what others say, but to what others are” (149). Chessman's argument here seems to shift into ontological concerns as she considers how we come to know and understand the being of those around us, suggesting that it is not only the poet who creates, that the reader's interpretation of a text cannot be separated from the act of creating that text: “We may ‘receive’ another's words, yet the intricacy of this situation is such that the reception includes our own inner account of such receiving, an account that involves not simply the significance of certain words, but the whole manner in which words (as sounds, as visual

objects) come to us” (150). My reading of *Stanzas* argues that such sharing of creative duties does much more than simply affect the way a text is “received” by the reader; rather, shared creative activities, particularly when employed in an autobiographical poem, allow readers to create new understandings of self and subjectivity as they read. In my phenomenological reading, these moments are intersubjective moments in which the self is constituted amid the constitution of the other.

Stanzas in Meditation as a Phenomenological Poem

I have found Edmund Husserl’s ideas about intersubjectivity so illuminating in reading Stein’s poem in part because this long poem is at its heart phenomenological. The poem exposes the tensions between various ways the world is constituted by unique individuals through its rejection of substantive language functioning on the vertical axis of signification described by Bruce Andrews and Roman Jakobson.³⁰ This tension is given explicit expression in Stanza IX of Part Two: “I find it suddenly very warm and this can easily be / Because after all may be it is” (II, ix). The “it” of these lines remains, like so many pronouns in the poem, free from the limitations of clear antecedents. “It” could refer to the weather, to body temperature, to a plate of food, to an emotional state. Because the antecedent is perpetually lost to everyone but Stein herself, readers, who are now co-creators, can instead focus on the function of the “it” in the same way we have shifted to focusing on the function of the “I” instead of the identity of the “I.” The suddenness of the discovery of warmth intensifies its separateness from the speaking “I,” suggesting that the external, material world was suddenly thrust upon the speaking voice. The study of phenomenology in general pays attention to the way subjects experience the world and then constitute the world out of those experiences. It inquires into the structures of consciousness

³⁰ See pages 39-40 of my introductory chapter.

that allow one to “find” the weather to be warm instead of, for example, declaring simply that “it is warm.” In the phenomenological process, then, the world is *constituted* by the perceiving consciousness. That is, the world is perceived and then ordered into a narrative of sorts. These lines from *Stanzas* suggest such a phenomenological perspective: the act of “finding” in the first line seems to render a moment of discovery or perception which then becomes a moment of potential reality: it “can” be. And yet, the “may be” of the second line hesitates, shying away from declaring with full certainty that the warmth *is*, must necessarily *be*. Such hesitations force us to locate this warmth, initially imposed, in reality as constituted by the speaker.

Stanza XV of Part One establishes what appears to be a firmly phenomenological claim, the idea that the world *as it is known* is intended in a perceiving consciousness, the meaning of the world emerging out of how one constitutes that world through an assemblage and interpretation of various experiences. The stanza, which concludes Part One, opens with an exploration of potential and present being, though this exploration never strays far from the idea of what it means to like something, an issue that dominates the first part of *Stanzas*: “Should they can be they might if they delight / In why they must see it be there not only necessarily / But which they might in which they might” (I, xv). These lines express a tentativeness about some action performed by the ambiguous “they.” Should they? Can be. They might if they delight. Earlier, I argued that the lack of pronoun antecedents in *Stanzas* refocused our attention on function instead of identity. Here, the contingency of the action—expressed through words like *should*, *can*, and *might*—reconfigure that function as potentiality. In fact, the speaker finds herself completely unable to resolve the text into language of actuality (Are they? They are.). As such, the signified action (or, at least, whatever “it” may refer to) denies the rigidity of ontological security. That is, the action remains always a phenomena, a potential action, a

contingent action—always just on the cusp of being constituted by the intending consciousness. These lines establish a tension between what must necessarily be and what might be or can be or should be—what already is and what potentially is. If there is no antecedent, each pronoun *could* refer to anything the reader can imagine.

Hejinian has noticed a concern with *what is* versus *what might be* throughout the entirety of *Stanzas* and interprets it as indicative of Stein's lifelong discomfort with her status as the youngest child in her family, a child conceived (along with Leo) only because two older children had died in infancy. In *Stanzas*, Hejinian argues, this contingency takes the form of "the astonishing and sometimes terrifying situation of improbability; the improbability of anything in particular's existing at all. It is against all odds that existence comes to any specific thing, idea, person, event and against all odds that they should come into the purview of one's life" ("A Common Sense" 362). Hejinian opens up a phenomenological analysis here, acknowledging Stein's interest in not only what is, which is a wholly ontological concern, but in what can or might be constituted by the perceiving subject. Stein articulated this very issue in her lecture "Portraits and Repetition," where she writes, in the context of her work in *Tender Buttons*, that "the words that make what I looked at be itself were always words that *to me* very exactly related themselves to that thing the thing at which I was looking, but as often as not had as I say nothing whatever to do with what any words would do that described that thing" (*LIA* 192, emphasis added). To my mind, the operative words in this sentence are "to me," Stein's acknowledgement that even when the object is "being itself"—is most present in the world purely as entity—the object is still only itself to a particular perceiver, as it is uniquely known by that particular person at that particular time. That is, when we are concerned with a thing's being, we can only ever be

concerned with the intended thing, the thing constituted within consciousness. The object does not function for us outside of our intention of it.

In fact, about six years before she wrote *Stanzas in Meditation*, Stein wrote the lecture “Composition as Explanation,” in which she develops a general theory of composition that depends upon a quite similar phenomenological understanding of the world. The lecture as a whole explains that the artist is never “ahead of his time” but rather is always “creating his time, even if the artists is not seen as such by the general public (CE 514). More crucial for my argument, though, is Stein’s conception of how the subject matter of writing changes across time as each generation gives way to the next. In Stein’s rendering, the truly creative artist “naturally” creates in absolute alignment with his or her own present moment. Changing modes and styles in art, then, develop out of changing experiences. Stein returns to this idea periodically throughout the lecture, and indeed seems so compelled by it as to repeat verbatim the following sentence twice: “The only thing that is different from one time to another is what is seen and what is seen depends upon how everybody is doing everything” (CE 513, 520). Writing for Stein often occurred as an act of intense concentration. Once she really saw her subject, really truly saw the umbrella, for example, or really listened to Mabel Dodge or Picasso, she was able to write those words that re-presented the reality of the thing or person in front of her. And though she insists on her writing as a way of making what she writes about be itself, the “self” of the thing perceived by Stein is never independent of what she does in order to constitute that thing in her consciousness, so that it what changes over time is not simply “how I see it,” but “how everybody is doing something.” The “doing” Stein mentions here implies the sort of active constitution that forms the basis of phenomenological thinking. Her focus on the thing being “seen” emphasizes this point: “[How everybody is doing everying] makes the thing we are

looking at very different and this makes what those who describe it make of it, it makes a composition, it confuses, it shows, it is, it looks, it likes it as it is" (CE 513). We should recall here Harriet Chessman's explanation of the way Stein's poetics fuses "telling" and "listening." In "Composition as Explanation," the way one actively "listens" to what the object "tells" is what determines how that object is intended within consciousness. Though Stein has been accused of writing in a private language that alienates readers and places her on the fringes of Modernism,³¹ she is actually acutely conscious of the intimate relationship between the artist's historical and cultural situation and the artist's work. In fact, the artist is a sort of representative of this time to the people living so closely to it that they cannot yet see it for themselves: "No one is ahead of his time, it is only that the particular variety of creating his time is the one that his contemporaries who also are creating their own time refuse to accept. And they refuse to accept it for a very simple reason and that is that they do not have to accept it for any reason" (CE 514). For Stein, then, even time itself falls within the purview of the intentional consciousness.

What I want to emphasize here is how insistent Stein is on the fact that she can get at the being of whatever object or person occupies her subject matter without making some unfounded claim for unbiased, detached objectivity. The complexity and subtlety of this claim is a profound response to not only the purportedly objective realism of the nineteenth century but also the shift to the interior that dominated Modernist texts. She deftly articulates a middle ground here, holding and maintaining what at first seems a paradoxical position, that despite the fact that our experiences of a thing must always be shaped by our limited perspectives, those limited

³¹ See, for example, Mary Loeffelholz's article arguing that *Stanzas* has been left out of the canon of Modernist long poems in part because of its lack of historical context. The poem contains very few references to anything outside the poem that can be historicized, that is, anything other than occasional references to common nouns such as trees or hills. Dydo has explained that Stein's texts in general during this period of her writing followed this same pattern, writing in *The Language That Rises* that "It is as if her writing was liberated from the everyday world, barely hinged anymore to whatever it is that generates it" (472).

perspectives still give us access to the thing's "true being." When Stein claims that "what is seen" changes based on "how everybody is doing everything," she indicates that objects in the world (what is seen) actually undergo changes based on how they are perceived by intending subjects. In so doing, she performs the same phenomenological task outlined by Edmund Husserl in his *Cartesian Meditations*. Phenomenologists, he writes, examine not simply an object, but the *intentional* object as present in consciousness: "they make it understandable how, in itself and by virtue of its current intentional structure, consciousness makes possible and necessary the fact that such an 'existing' and 'thus determined' Object is intended in it, occurs in it as such a sense" (Husserl 47). Just as Stein can say that simply by looking at the object she makes it be itself, Husserl proposes that the structures of consciousness demand that objects, though they "exist" outside the individual's consciousness, necessarily exist as always already intended, and thus interpreted, objects. To be, it seems, is to be intended within consciousness.³²

Stanza XV of Part One continues with this theme, further emphasizing the perspectival aspect of being itself:

For which they might delight if they look there

And they see there that they look there

To see it be there which it is if it is

Which may be where where it is

If they do not occasion it to be different

³² Stein's use of the word "everybody," though, suggests that this intended being is not generated through a simple one-on-one encounter between a single person and a single object. This is a noted difference from her assessment of *Tender Buttons* in which the object was itself "to me." As Stein shifts from a general interest in objects and people (in *Tender Buttons* and the portraits) to the more abstract ideas of language (*Stanzas*) and existence (*Geographical History*), we see her actually welcoming others into the perceptive process, at the same time that, as I explained earlier, she began questioning the stability of her own identity. It is in this "everybody" doing "anything" and through that "doing" creating the way things are seen, that we see intersubjectivity at work—the shared constitution of the world.

From what it is. (I, xv)

Stein's language here doubles over itself again and again, the is-ness of whatever "it" is repeated and multiplied back in on itself multiple times even in the same line. Yet interwoven within this statement of simple being is some seeing subject—Stein's acknowledgement of the always already there perceiving "they." In these lines, they "look there" and in that looking "delight"; they "see it be there." "They" become as important to the being of "it" as "it" is. Stein pushes the power of this perspective further in the second and fifth lines of this excerpt. First, "And they see there that they look there." "They" do not simply look out on the world here, perceiving the world, but they see themselves in the world, see themselves seeing the world. This is itself an autobiographical move of sorts, in that "they" are able to split into both subject and object in this sentence, perceiving themselves as perceivers of the world. Secondly, "If they do not occasion it to be different" gives "them" a good deal of authority over "it," in that "where it is" can be changed, "occasion[ed]...to be different" by the perceiving subjects. An object's location is, perhaps, more easily grasped in phenomenological terms, especially if we think in terms of prepositions. Words that establish relationships between one thing and another, or one place and another, tend to presume there is some subject whose own location determines the meaning of the word. The word "here," for example, is only meaningful if the location of the speaking subject is known. Saying "I am here" to someone over the phone is useless unless previously useful information had been provided. Thus, the possible change in "where" Stein points to in these lines should not be surprising. Significantly, though, by changing the "where" of line 7 to "what" in line 9, Stein seems to subtly suggest that a difference in location brings about a simultaneous change in the is-ness of the thing—a phenomenological claim.

In these opening lines of Stanza XV, then, Stein has created and solidified the mutually dependent, mutually supporting relationship between the perceiving subject and the perceived object (the world). This relationship is condensed into the moment of perception in the next lines:

In one direction there is the sun and the moon

In the other direction there are cumulous clouds and the sky

In the other direction there is why

They look at what they see

They look very long while they talk along

And they can be said to see that at which they look (I, XV)

This selection opens with the description of a single point which serves as a sort of eye, things in the perceived world fanning out in different directions. Yet while the first and second lines deal entirely with things in themselves, she shifts in the third line to interpreted things: “In the other direction there is why.” By following this “why” immediately with three lines devoted to the act of looking at what is seen, Stein seems to suggest that the subjective look is itself an act of interpretation and an act of making meaning in the world (similar to how Husserl insists that to be conscious is to be conscious *of something*). Objects in the world are made meaningful, or, to return to Stein’s lecture, are made most themselves, when the human perspective is introduced into the situation of objects in the world. In fact, then, we could consider such a claim to be a truly autobiographical/phenomenological one, that to know oneself (knowing) is to know the world (known). In this vein, James Olney claims that autobiography is in fact much more than a study of self, but is rather a study of the world, a world that cannot be separated from that self: “One sees, looking out from the subjective center, various objects—shapes and forms, people,

movement, expressive gestures—yet even these objects ‘become’ in that study, they only exist or are for that study as they relate to me” (*Metaphors of Self* 14).

The rest of Stanza XV is filled mostly with lines that employ the poem’s characteristic abstraction, punctuated by a few moments of concreteness, in which we suddenly find ourselves in the midst of a garden or concerned with crops and the amount of rain they receive. For the most part, however, the stanza keeps the antecedents of “it” and “they” decidedly at bay, or, it often seems, just out of reach. For example, just prior to the lines referencing what sounds like a beautiful but orderly garden (“All this cannot be mixed.”) we get three lines that seem as intent on writing about a particular thing in a particular place perceived by particular subjects as they are on occluding the same things and places and people: “They see that they have what is there can there / Be there also what is to be there if they can care / they care for it of course they care for it” (I, xv). Someone, we know from these lines, cares for something that is there. But other than the word “care,” we are given very, very little in the way of reference to help us make a definite interpretation of the lines. Throughout *Stanzas*, readers are often made to feel that the lines *must* mean something, if only the right way of reading is hit upon. Perhaps if I read it out loud, one thinks, or read with particular beat, if I can just find out who was visiting her the day of composition—surely there is *something* that will break the code of these lines. But there remains, always, simply an establishment of relationships between forever unknown people and things. One is made to feel as if one is drifting back and forth, up and down, in and out in some frictionless, wide open space with walls few and far between. One is, in fact, almost always in a state of “between” in this poem, but between what and what is nearly impossible to say.

There are moments, of course, that provide brief respite from the drift, small islands erected in the chaos of there and here and it and they. Stanza XV, and thus Part One as a whole,

concludes with a sudden burst of concreteness, both of image and language. I want to quote the last ten lines in full in order to emphasize the radical shift that takes place here compared to what has come before and what will follow:

When they find the clouds white and the sky blue
 The hills green and different in shape too
 And the next to what followed when the other bird flew
 And what he did when he dug out what he was told to
 And which way they will differ if they tell them too
 They do it by hand and they carry it all too
 Up the way they did still have it to do
 And so they think well of well-wishers.
 I have my well-wishers thank you. (I, xv)

As occurred twice previously in this particular stanza, Stein welcomes into her writing the physical world around her: clouds, the sky, hills, birds, and even a “he” who sounds like a gardener told to dig in a certain place. All this makes autobiographical sense, as we know the poem was written while Stein and Toklas were at their summer house in Bilignin, close to the natural world and the people who work in that world. At this point in the poem, readers surely “can be said to see that at which they look,” can finally see not only what the poem’s speaker sees, but what author saw. Such a move effects a union of sorts between author and reader, welcoming the reader into the intimacy of a shared vision not so carefully mitigated by a barrier of difficult language. In addition, these concluding lines also read more like traditional lyric poetry. Out of the ten concluding lines, nine rhyme. In a way, the use of the “oo” rhymes here seems to reach back to the nursery rhyme feel of the poem’s opening two lines. As a number of

scholars have demonstrated with Sylvia Plath's poem "Daddy," this particular rhyme tends to create a childish atmosphere, in both these cases one at odds with the general subject matter of the poem (a disturbing likening of her father to a Nazi on the one hand and a highly abstract rendering of autobiography on the other). Stein also utilizes a rather regular rhythm in these lines, almost every line having four dominant beats than can be tapped out as the words are read out loud. (Only the last three lines stray slightly from this rhythm, as the stanza concludes in a suddenly conversational tone.)

By shifting in her concluding lines to language and images that can be described, painted, integrated into the body's rhythms, Stein situates her readers in the same phenomenological moment she's been considering throughout. The rhythm and rhyme slow down the reading process, mimicking a stilling of the body's movement and thus welcoming in a phenomenological experience of the world, while the birds and hills and clouds and (probable) gardeners insist upon the presence and potency and power of the perceiving subject. While at the beginning of this stanza she simply presented an image of the perceiver's individual vantage point ("In one direction there is the sun and the moon / In the other direction there are cumulous clouds and the sky...") and left it to be meditated upon, here she inserts the reader bodily into the moment by involving the breath (rhythm) and the ear and eye (rhyme) in the reading of the poem, so that the act of reading is now guided less by signification than by the more semiotic elements of language. Reading the poem, which had been an exclusively interpretive act, now becomes a moment of perception—suddenly, we can move beyond the more cerebral task of interpreting pronouns and function words and perhaps tap our foot in time or read the lines out loud with a noticed inflection at the end. Readers are *there*, looking at that which they see,

noticing perhaps for the first time the text in front of them and, more importantly, their own relationship to and with that text.

I Like You Like We All Like to Like Alike

To conclude my reading of *Stanzas*, I want to turn to the prevalence of the word “like” in the poem in a number of different forms. Skimming the poem quickly will reveal that Stein dwelled with “liking” and “being alike” over and over throughout the poem. My reading of the prevalence of these two concepts should hopefully demonstrate how Stein uses the words to, in a way, sidle up next to the idea of independent subjects sharing in their constitution of the world through radicalized intersubjective relationships. Stanzas XIII-XV in Part Two function as a sort of three-part meditation on what becomes in this poem the twin phenomena of *liking* something on the one hand and *being like* something on the other. Through a conflation of terms and piling on of homonyms and near-homonyms, Stein puts forth, at least implicitly and visually, the idea that to like something or someone is the same as or at least closely similar to being like that same something or someone. Such a concept has the effect of highlighting the nature of the relationship between the liking subject and the liked object and further, through the proposed “I am like what I like,” of merging the identities of these two supposedly separate beings.

Because of their mirrored brevity, I see Stanzas XIII and XV as forming frames between which Stanza XIV serves as a more extended meditation on the subject opened and then closed by the preceding and following stanzas. Stanza XIII reads: “But it was only which was all the same” and Stanza XV: “It is very much like it.” Stanza XIII concludes without a period, which possibly indicates that the idea is not concluded, that it is to be carried on into the following stanza. Since Stanza XV mirrors the brevity of stanza XIII and also addresses the same subject, I

take its closing period to be a sort of definite stopping point, enough so that we are able to easily take the three stanzas as a larger unit. Both stanzas take as their subject matter the concepts of sameness and similarity, though we are never given any sense of “what” is the same as or like “what.” It is the *idea* of “like” and “same” that holds our attention here.

Stanza XIV, then, explores the subject of similarity in a bit more detail, if “detail” is the word we can use to describe a rather roundabout, conclusion-less play of words and idea juxtapositions. The stanza opens with, “It is not only early that they make no mistake / A nightingale and a robin” (II, xiv). By offering two different birds as the follow-up to “they” not making a mistake, Stein allows for multiple interpretations. Perhaps she suddenly provides an antecedent (though it follows its pronoun here) and it is the nightingale and the robin who, early, do not make mistakes. More likely, however, is the possibility that the line break serves as a substitute for the idea of “between”: they make no mistake *between* a nightingale and a robin. The two birds remain completely separate and apart in the correct identification. Yet the lines that follow problematize this correct separation: “Or rather that which can which / Can which he which they can choose which” (II, xiv). Though the lines are assuredly obscure and convoluted, the opening “Or rather” signifies an alternative to the clear differentiation between the two birds (though because “between” is merely conjectured at in the emptiness between the lines, it is just as possible that no distinction was intended, that the “and” actually fused the birds together, that “Or rather” now brings about the distinction). Whatever the case, the repetition of the word “which” across the lines reads like a stutter that resolutely prevents us from accessing the “correct” interpretation. The lines are maddening, as they seem to insist, that we return to a previous thought while simultaneously denying us access to that thought by repeating over and over again the word used to point back in time: which *what*, we silently scream.

In the following lines, Stein continues to tease us with the possibility of definite signification while also welcoming back the chaos of unsigned reality. “They know or not like that / They make this be once or not alike / Not by this time only when they like / To have been very much absorbed.” (II, xiv). The first line of this sequence proposes two different ways of knowing, which “they” either do or do not perform, though as readers, we will be frustrated in our attempt to articulate what this knowing is “like.” Intuitively, perhaps, we will look to the immediately preceding lines for the antecedent to “that,” only to find ourselves confronted again with “Can which he which they can choose which.” Certainly the choice we’ve been offered has become complicated. Not only between the robin and the nightingale now, but between knowing or not knowing. Is this way of knowing (or not) a matter of how to know which is which, of how to distinguish one thing in the world from another thing in the world, how to know that the robin is not the nightingale? Part of this knowing results from our ability to discern relationships between objects in the world. How does the nightingale’s song relate to the robin’s? How does the color of the robin’s breast relate to the nightingale’s? How is the robin *like* the nightingale? (How is a raven like a writing desk?) These three lines begin to complicate what it means to relate to something by being “like” it. By “mak[ing] this be once” there is a hint that “they” are the ones creating the likeness or denying the likeness (“or not alike”), so that the robin is not “naturally” related to the nightingale, but only related when we say it is. Another way of saying this is that it is the birds *as constituted in our consciousness* that relate to each other, not the birds in and of themselves. In the next line, then, Stein suddenly switches her use of “like” from indicating similarity in different things to being pleased by something. Indeed, Stein’s frequent alternation between these two forms forces readers, as I argued above, to consider how liking and being like something are similar, at least in the language we use to signify those activities.

Now, though, “they” return to this activity with such an intensity that they become “very much absorbed.”

Stanza XIV concludes with brief attention paid to the issue of what it means to acknowledge a subject other than one’s self. The final two lines read: “There which is not only here but here as well as there. / They like whatever I like.” (II, xiv). In Husserl’s phenomenology, the distinction between here and there and the empathetic imagining of oneself “over there” is crucial to the process of “appresentation,” the process by which I as subject know that a being outside of my “sphere of ownness” is also a subject with its own sphere of ownness, and I intend him as he intends me (Husserl 118-19). Husserl posits that this recognition occurs because I see someone with physical characteristics similar to my own (stands upright, long arms and legs, no fur) and that my recognition of this similarity allows me to understand that she intends me as I intend her. As phenomenologist James Marsh puts it, “There is, therefore, a sense in which I feel and sense a community with these other beings; they reveal themselves as ‘like me.’ We should not, however, take this ‘like me’ quality in an explicit, inferential sense. Rather, my lived body implicitly resonates with the lived body of the other in a way that I do not with trees and dogs” (129). Appresentation thus allows the subject to recognize her own objecthood at the hands of the subject that is to her the intended object. “They like whatever I like” becomes “they see whatever I see.” Stein’s line plays with this concept, writing that here is both here and there. By simply stating that “here is there” instead of running through the entirety of the logic—here is here to me but there to you, and there is there to me but here to you—Stein conflates the two supposedly separate spaces into one, allowing her to constitute them in her mind as “all the same.” *And yet*, the line immediately following this merging of subjective spaces returns to the two subjects as entirely separate entities deserving of their own unique signifiers: “they” and “I.”

Stein thus allows for these subjectivities to be blended together while remaining utterly their own. What may have otherwise been simply a statement of similar interests and tastes, now—with the conflation of here and there and the articulation of how “liking” can be united with “likeness”—becomes a much bolder statement of a shared, simultaneous constitution of objects in the mind (and a certain formulation of appresentation). Thus, this mutual liking becomes a moment of intersubjective object constitution, in which the “I” and the “they” of this sentence are intimately linked by their shared affinity for “whatever” or “whomever.” I’d suggest, then, that we reconsider Stein’s famous phrase, “Why don’t you read the way I write?” Considered in light of the lines from *Stanzas*, this question becomes a request for the reader to share in Stein’s subjective constitution of the world in her mind, to bridge the gulf of here and there and to gain access to consciousness in a way that is not fraught with questions of power and definition and identity, but rather with the intimacy identified by Chessman. Suddenly, engaging with one’s readers is not a matter of the terrifying publicity that Stein would soon experience during her US tour, but rather a mutual, shared privacy. This is an important move for Stein to make, for, to my mind, it actually acknowledges the unique subjectivities of individual readers. To only consider readers as a “reading public” is to lump them into one mass who serve no other purpose than to consume the words one has written (and by extension to purchase those words, thus denying Stein ownership of them). To share in these readers’ subjectivities, though, is to share in their ability to constitute the world themselves, to assert the readers’ interpretive faculties as valued and vital to the text. The text, in this reading, becomes the point at which here and there merge into the same space, the point at which two subjects can be free to simply consider the intentional consciousness of the other, the way these two can like alike.

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Chapter 2: Metonymy and the Eidetic Reduction in Lyn Hejinian's *My Life*

Metonymy and Authority

Lyn Hejinian's autobiographical prose poem *My Life* is a poem of what is not there, a poem of gaps, of between. As much as the poem is assembled out of striking images and compact, lovely sentences, the glue that holds the work together turns out to be the silences between these sentences, something Hejinian hints at throughout her work. Take, for example, the following line: "It was awhile before I understood what had come between the stars, to form the constellations" (48). What does come between the stars to form the Big Dipper, the little Dipper, Orion? What is it that forms these pinpoints of light into images in the sky? It is, of course, the star gazer, the person standing silently on the ground millions of miles away, who looks at the stars and sees the pattern and, informed by mythology and culture, reads the gods into the night sky. In some ways, this beautiful sentence functions as a metaphor for the text as a whole, each sentence serving as a star, requiring the presence of a star gazer in the guise of a reader to collect them out of their isolation and form them into what Hejinian confidently tells us in her title is her life, her self. Such a poem thus becomes a meeting ground of subjects, a site at which the reader must, in a very real way, create the text in front of her.

In this chapter, I argue that because *My Life* depends so much on metonymic (instead of logical?) relationships between sentences, it allows for the "life" in the text to shift from an, actual, historical life to a possible life. That is, the life that the reader reads is not, in fact, the life of *Lyn Hejinian*, but rather a single, possible configuration of a life. *My Life* invites readers to create poetry through their reading, and, because it is an autobiographical poem, the creation of poetry becomes the creation of self. My argument offers a new way of addressing the community

orientation of the Language poets and explores the question of why autobiography should matter at all for poets as dismissive of the confessional, poet/persona mode of writing as the Language poets. Using a blend of the poetics of the Language poetry group and a language-based revision of Edmund Husserl's concept of the "eidetic reduction," I hope to ultimately show that Hejinian's text employs what Husserl called "free variation," a mental process by which the perceiving subject imagines the object of consciousness in all its possible manifestations as a way to discover what is necessary in order for that object to be perceived as such. By experimenting with the methods by which a life is told, Hejinian gives up authority over her own life and self, much as Stein did in *Stanzas in Meditation* (though with very different end results). My primary claim in my reading of *My Life* is that the metonymic structure of the text highlights the contingency of the autobiographical self and welcomes the reader to perform the imaginative, creative task of free variation and through that performance become a creative subject within the text.

Particularly compelling to me is the idea that readers become fully-fledged *subjects* when reading texts like *My Life* instead of simply nameless, faceless members of a mass audience. The principle of free variation is, indeed, *free*, allowing readers to take creative liberties not just in the construction of a text, but in the construction of a life. Juliana Spahr has written about the reader-oriented nature of *My Life* in her article "Resignifying Autobiography: Lyn Hejinian's *My Life*." Her main contention is that Hejinian's poem, "through its extreme exposure of the reading act, disrupts any possible assumptions by the reader that *My Life* is specific to one individual. Instead, it encourages its readers to add to the discussion of subjectivity a questioning of the politics of representations of subjectivity and of their own relationship to these representations" (149-50). My own argument will echo Spahr's claim that the poem offers readers the chance to

participate in subjectivity as a *process* instead of simply receiving an essentialized vision of self in an autobiography. Where Spahr focuses primarily on *My Life* as a poem of resistance, however, I want to offer a more positive reading, expanding Spahr's political resistance (or perhaps narrowing it back down) to consider the very processes of perception and creation that inform an open reading of *My Life*.

In her oft-cited essay "The Rejection of Closure," Hejinian cautions about considering the form of any one poem as a boundary that shuts down its own creative possibilities. She writes,

Can form make the primary chaos (the raw material, the unorganized impulse and information, the uncertainty, incompleteness vastness) articulate without depriving it of its capacious vitality, its generative power? Can form go even further than that and actually generate that potency, opening uncertainty to curiosity, incompleteness to speculation, and turning vastness into plenitude? In my opinion, the answer is yes; that is, in fact, the function of form in art. (47)

The publication history of *My Life* suggests that the form of this poem does indeed provide the chaos of the author's past "life" with "its generative power." The book, first published in 1978, originally included 37 sections, each of which contained 37 sentences, which at the time matched Hejinian's age. When the book was republished in 1985, Hejinian added eight sections and eight sentences to each section, again in order to match her age, which was 45. The extension of the autobiographical project beyond its initial publication emphasizes how contingent the life presented in the book is on the author's formal, organizational, and narrative decisions. The structure of the book is an arbitrary structure, though by *arbitrary* I do not mean random and without thought. Rather, like Marianne Moore, Hejinian created her own form and then fit her

“language” life into that form, repeating the action eight years later.³³ Neither of these versions is a more “correct” or “complete” version of Hejinian’s life than the other. The later version contains more material, to be sure, but its relationship with the 1978 version merely highlights its own fundamental incompleteness. A life, while being lived, is always in process, and no autobiographical text can “capture” that life wholly. (Nor can a biographical text written after the subject’s death, obviously.) The life presented, then, is contingent on the particular formal arrangement chosen by the author. Also, though, the life presented is contingent on the reader. Does it matter whether any one reader picks up the 1978 or the 1985 version of the text? I would argue that it does not because, in either case, the reader still reads a life. Hejinian’s always-in-process text, then, offers to her readers the freedom to read not about a single life—the life of Lyn Hejinian—but rather to actively create the meaning of the concept of an individual life. It is within this process that I see Husserl’s eidetic reduction—the process of free variation—taking hold. The question that emerges through reading this text is not *What have I learned about Lyn Hejinian’s life?* but rather, *What have I learned about what it means to live a life?*

Despite my claims about reader autonomy within the text, Hejinian does offer what could be read as a poetics for the book as a whole. About halfway through the book, a section opens with the header “Reason looks for two, then arranges it from there” (81). If we take “Reason” as a synecdoche for a person, a perceiving subject, then we get an image of a person always in the process of creating patterns or discovering differences (binaries) in the world. The absence of a grammatical object—two what?—focuses our attention on the act of arranging instead of the thing arranged, much in the way that the book as a whole focuses us on the writing of a life, not the life written (more on that later). The limited “two” is rather startling: what is there to

³³ The term “language” here comes from Lisa Samuels, who uses the term “language self” to describe the subject of an “autography,” a book which does *not* tell the life of an “experiencing human” (Samuels, “Eight Justifications” 103).

arrange? One on the left and one on the right? The fig before the apple? One causing the other? One logically subordinated to the other? The matter-of-fact way that the idea is presented, without qualification or imagery or any sort of “poetizing,” seems to say, “this is simply the way things are.” Read with Husserl’s definition of intentionality in mind, we see a basic phenomenological claim about consciousness: consciousness is always consciousness *of something*. In this book, obviously, our authorial subject—Lyn Hejinian—intends (is conscious of) moments of her own life. The language she uses obviously shapes these intendings, but she is, in fact, “arranging” them, looking for two, setting them next to each other. In this heading, then, Hejinian has laid out a basic understanding of the perceiving subject in relation to the world: the perceiving subject as perpetual interpreter, arranger, and meaning maker in and of that world. Understanding the implications of this line should assist us in our efforts to interpret (in our reasonable way) her directions in the rest of the section, directions that offer as much as they deny.

The final sentences of this section bookend the always-already intending vision of the perceiving subject offered in the heading, in part by offering metonymic reading as the mode of interpretation most appropriate to a text (a life?) such as this one. A metonymic reading, as I’ll show, depends on active participation from the reader and in turn allows for radically different readings—radically different texts, then—for each reading subject. The section ends with the following three sentences: “Not fragments but metonymy. Duration. Language makes tracks” (83). Having offered up eighty-three pages of what could easily be called “fragments,” Hejinian here proposes an alternative way of reading: a metonymic reading that does not break up meaning into isolated and incomplete chunks, but rather expands the possibilities of created meaning outward. These three sentences are contextualized a bit earlier in the section when

Hejinian provides a sort of definition of metonymy. She writes, “The sudden brief early morning breeze, the first indication of a day’s palpability, stays high in the trees, while flashing silver and green the leaves flutter, a bird sweeps from one branch to another, the indistinct shadows lift off the crumpled weeds, smoke rises from the gravel quarry—all this is metonymy” (81). On one level, these lines read like the lyric description of a beautiful morning setting, similar in style to the early chapters of Virginia Woolf’s *The Waves*. However, by suggesting to her readers that the lines are, in fact, metonymy, Hejinian offers up a much more complex assessment of description, one that handily dispels the notion of “realist” description that provides accurate and “truthful” images of the world at large, in part by insisting that the reader, not just the observing author, play a role in the creation of the metonymically revealed place. The trope of metonymy requires a particular kind of interpretive response from the reader. Instead of simply interpreting already present elements of the text, metonymic interpretation requires a creative sort of response. In part, this is because of the way metonymy combines different elements together in a non-hierarchical way, forgoing the interpretive privilege of the author in favor of the creative opportunities of the reader. The most basic definition of metonymy is a trope in which one aspect of a concept is substituted for the entire concept, such as a “glass” substituted in for a “glass of wine,” or a “telescope.” The recipient of a metonymic phrase, whether that recipient is the person in charge of the night’s beverages or the person with the telescope, must employ a number of methods to fill in the absence, or the gap, between “glass” and “glass filled with wine.”

Hejinian understands metonymy on a more paratactical level, influenced primarily by the definition offered by the Russian linguist Roman Jakobson in his work “Two Aspects of Language.” Jakobson defines metonymy as a trope of “contiguity” or “combination” (254). It is defined here in opposition to the metaphorical function of language, which is based not on

combination, but rather selection—the process of picking out one sign in opposition to possible alternatives. During the metonymic process in language, the language user groups together the linguistic units selected during the metaphoric process. These groupings, Jakobson writes, mean that at any one time, all linguistic units “serve[] as a context for simpler units” and find their “own context in a more complex linguistic unit” (243). One of the more interesting results of laying out these twin “poles” of language in this way is how the combination/selection binary insists that no linguistic unit, whether a single word or a phrase or, more relevant to our purposes here, a sentence, ever stands—ever *means*—alone. The metonymic function of language guarantees the necessity of context.

While perhaps not a revolutionary claim in and of itself, when considered in light of a poem like *My Life*, the guarantee of context renders ever more relevant the role of the reader in constituting the text as a meaningful moment of language. Metonymic relationships, in Jakobson’s—and by extension, Hejinian’s—understanding, are relationships of adjacency, of the one thing placed next to the other thing. The job of the reader is to “make something” out of the space remaining between those concepts.³⁴ For Hejinian, this creative process is a pleasurable experience. She writes in her essay “Strangeness” about the way that metonymy maintains the pleasure in the object. Metonymy “moves from thing to thing; its principle is combination rather than selection,” and while it “maintains the intactness and discreteness of particulars, its paratactic perspective gives it multiple vanishing points” (148). Her primary claim in “Strangeness” is that metonymy allows things in the world to maintain their discreteness, their

³⁴ The spatial vocabulary here is obviously metaphorical, there being no way for “space” to exist in between concepts. However, the metaphor is not that far off the mark. I am particularly interested in the ways that the literal space between one printed sentence and the next—less than a centimeter—is expanded imaginatively when the text dismisses easy logical relationships between sentences, as Hejinian does in *My Life*. It is, perhaps, within those gaps shorter than a centimeter that the most work must be done by a reader of metonymic writing.

isolation from each other, and for her, their strangeness. While users of metaphor do the work of making strange things familiar (and familiar things strange), users of metonymy, to quote Gertrude Stein, use words to “make what I look[] at be itself” (*LIA* 192). “That is,” Hejinian writes, “to the extent that metonymy conserves perception of the world of objects, conserves their quiddity, their particular precisions, it is a ‘scientific’ description” (“Strangeness” 151).

Lisa Samuels offers the binary of description versus definition to explain what Hejinian does in *My Life*, writing that “Words, events, and the poetics of the work itself are described. Perception of description, not interpretation of definition, becomes the reader’s task. Telling description is a matter of *intersecting and coinciding*, rather than defining, information” (“Eight Justifications” 107, my emphasis). I would argue that the descriptive task Samuels identifies here is similar to the combinatory function of metonymy, in that it sets together discrete parts of a whole, allowing those parts to remain isolated and individual—strange—even amid their combination. In fact, Jakobson notes in his work on metonymy that when the metonymic function of text is given priority over the metaphoric, the “whole” of the text is risked, as so many elements are combined together—instead of a “select” few being used—that the reader’s focus shifts from the whole to the part. In reference to the Russian novelist Gleb Ivanovič Uspenskij, Jakobson quotes from A. Kamegulov, who writes of Uspenskij, “the reader is crushed by the multiplicity of detail unloaded on him in a limited verbal space, and is physically unable to grasp the whole, so that the portrait is often lost” (qtd. in Jakobson 257). Hejinian’s text does not *entirely* obscure the whole. As critics have shown, there is, amid the metonymically arranged sentences, a lovely portrait of a middle class woman, from childhood through adulthood. The metonymic thrust, though, ensures that these beautiful isolated sentences remain forever islands amid a raging sea of combination, the “I”—the “My” of the title—always just out of reach. Metonymy, then, does

not ask readers to imagine the terms of the trope as anything other than what they are,³⁵ as metaphor does.

Since Hejinian has practically instructed readers of *My Life* to consider her text as an extended metonymic writing,³⁶ we should consider ways in which the text both supports and resists the maintenance of each “object’s” quiddity. To do so, I want to consider explicitly Jakobson’s and Hejinian’s ideas about contiguity, combination, and strangeness. Let us return, then, to the lines that Hejinian claims are metonymic: “The sudden brief early morning breeze, the first indication of a day’s palpability, stays high in the trees, while flashing silver and green the leaves flutter, a bird sweeps from one branch to another, the indistinct shadows lift off the crumpled weeds, smoke rises from the gravel quarry—all this is metonymy” (81). As the reader moves through these lines, no doubt the individual images begin to cohere in the reader’s mind into what we might broadly call a lovely spring morning. They are, in fact, being “arranged,” and in that arranging, we do not think of these sentences as anything out of the ordinary, but rather as simple lyric description. Suddenly, however, the dash thrusts itself into the sentence, halting utterly the constitution of the day in the reader’s mind, and we are informed by an authorial voice: “all this is metonymy.” The declaration of metonymy, I would suggest, severs the clear ties and widens the gaps between these phrases, thus risking the loss of the *day* that is created through the cumulative image. When Jakobson describes metonymy as a mode of contiguity, he

³⁵ A phenomenological reading here, however, would caution against taking Hejinian’s claim to a “scientific” reading as a purely objective reading. The Stein sentence I quoted here, as I explained in my chapter on *Stanzas in Meditation* (see pages 67-68), emphasizes that objects are themselves “to me,” thus allowing for the object to maintain scientific “isolation” but also subjective “intention.” The same sort of balance seems to be at work here.

³⁶ Samuels has also noted the ways that *My Life* tells readers how to read, something she ascribes to its surprising lack of difficulty. She writes, “Such guidance systems (frequent self-explanations and simple diction) preserve the non-specialized nature of this work. It does not swim in private enigmas, it teaches us how to read it—as Wordsworth said good poetry should do—and it is consistent in its self-presentation” (“Eight Justifications” 107).

is describing a function of language in which linguistic units—words, phrases, sentences—are “placed” adjacent to each other, logic and meaning emerging out of the relationships among those units. Those relationships can be established by words within the sentences—such as Hejinian’s use of the word “while” above, which explicitly connects the fluttering leaves to the morning breeze—but they can also, in more paratactical language, be established exclusively by the reader’s own constitution of the “whole” on the page.³⁷ That said, a whole need not always emerge, as Jakobson pointed out in his reference to Gleb Ivanovič Uspenskij’s work. The formation of a whole is, in fact, contingent on the reader’s own mode of “arrangement.” In this way, I would argue that metonymically arranged phrases and sentences provide opportunities for readers to, first, notice the “palpability” of the individual “units,” thus, as Hejinian argues, “preserving their quiddity.” Second, such a method prompts readers to acknowledge the work that goes into declaring that the brief morning breeze, the fluttering leaves and the sweeping bird *do* indicate something other than themselves—a lovely spring day. Considered in such a way, metonymic writing, which becomes metonymic reading, establishes vibrantly creative spaces in which writer and reader, together, “arrange things from there.”

This reading is supported by Hejinian’s words at the end of this section, “Not fragments but metonymy. Duration. Language makes tracks” (83). This is an interesting moment in Hejinian’s book. Though, she values metonymy specifically for the way it allows ideas to remain “strange,” to maintain a sort of scientific “quiddity,” here metonymy is presented as *resisting* the isolation and incompleteness of fragments. In part, this is because she conceives of paratactical, or metonymical, arrangement as a substitute of sorts for hierarchical and logical arrangements.

³⁷ A well-known example of such paratactical arrangement is in William Carlos Williams’ poem “Spring and All,” in which the first verb does not emerge until line 15: “dazed spring approaches—”. Lines 1-14 are composed of individual elements of the spring day: mottled clouds (3), dried weeds (6), scattering of tall trees (8), dead, brown leaves (11), and so on. Williams’ refusal to order these individual elements in any way indicates the same sort of interest in reader-driven metonymic language that Hejinian values.

When ideas are contiguous, instead of ranked and organized, they are simply set together:

“Composition by juxtaposition presents observed phenomena without merging them, preserving their discrete particularity while attempting also to represent the matrix of their proximities” (“Strangeness” 154-55). The word “matrix” here indicates the endless ways in which ideas can be arranged or made sense of when there are merely set together in the author’s—and subsequently, the reader’s—mind. The idea of a matrix here implicitly rules out more orderly metaphors for such writing, such as a chain, which would ensure the careful, one-after-the-other march of sentences. A matrix of ideas simply indicates connections and adjacencies, not order.

In fact, the idea of the matrix calls to mind a metaphor used by Jakobson in his description of the type of aphasia he associates with metonymy. Jakobson calls the loss of the metonymic function within language a “contexture-deficient aphasia” that results in “word heaps” instead of coherent sentences (251). Metonymic aphasics, unable to place words in context, lose the ability to order them in understandable, syntactically acceptable ways, resulting in “heaps” instead of logical grammar. In *My Life*, the metonymic function of language is not lost entirely. Sentences are impeccably constructed. Rather, I would argue that the metonymic function is disrupted, radicalized, so that, instead of supporting the hierarchical arrangement that Jakobson sees (254), it works to level out or flatten those arrangements.³⁸ The resulting “life heap” emerges as a juxtaposition of languaged moments of perception or memory. How the heap is sorted and arranged depends, then, on what the reader chooses to do with the resulting open spaces.³⁹ That is, amid the “contexture” deficiency of the paratactic life, the reader must supply

³⁸ Hejinian uses the word “flatness” to describe Stein’s methods in *Stanzas in Meditation*. She sees the loss of antecedents in that poem as a process of language being “flattened” into the details of quotidian life. See my discussion of this method on page 57 of that chapter for a fuller discussion of Hejinian’s ideas.

³⁹ The term “heap” here is perhaps not entirely fair. There is a discernible order to *My Life*, the text *overall* progressing from childhood to adulthood. Hejinian herself actually resists the idea of the heap in

the contexts. In such a way, then, the process of reading—and ultimately, of critiquing—must shift into new creative modes. Jonathan Monroe in fact argues that paratactic poetry and philosophy are “at once the highest and most grounded mimesis...such work calls us to place into conversation, if not in question, the ‘naturalness’ of what-is-called ‘critical’ response, including such terms as ‘exposition’ and ‘elucidation,’ the ways in which such terms over-determine what is presumed to be the character and effectivity of response (as unknowable, not given in advance)” (Monroe 607). Paratactically written and read works, then, offer up space for criticism itself to maintain the openness of adjacency and combination.

Overtly metonymic or paratactic writing as enacted by Hejinian in *My Life* tends to foreground non-linear ways of reading. That is, the heap of sentences does not insist that the first lead to the second, the second to the third, and so on, in part because the elements of normal, communicative language—or logical argumentation—that suggest such a forward movement are frequently absent in this text. Take, for example, the following group of three sentences from the first section of the book: “But a word is a bottomless pit. It became magically pregnant and one day split open, giving birth to a stone egg, about as big as a football. In May when the lizards emerge from the stones, the stones turn gray, from green” (8). The sentences are arranged by Hejinian *as though* they are connected together through a standard set of coherent antecedent relationships. However, those relationships are quite muddled in the loss of the “contexture” that Jakobson described regarding the metonymic aphasic. Hejinian’s sentences tend to assume the reader’s knowledge of either a pronoun’s antecedent (such as for the opening “It” of the second sentence) or simply the narrative antecedent (such as the beginning of a story). This is, in fact,

her essay “The Rejection of Closure,” writing that in her work “Resistance” she “prevent[ed] the work from disintegrating into its separate parts—scattering sentence-rubble haphazardly on the waste heap—[by using] various syntactic devices to foreground or create the conjunction between ideas” (44-45). Such a statement could easily be applied to the repetition and structure of *My Life*, though I would maintain that within each section, memories and perceptions are in a way “heaped” upon the reader to sort and arrange.

what we all do every time we speak, write, listen, and read. Occasionally, however, Hejinian's antecedents are either entirely absent or just displaced (misplaced?) in other sections of the book. Certain stories or concepts recur throughout the book, and one need "only" remember the material from fifty pages ago to "fill in the gap." The sentences I just quoted, however, occur so early in the book (the second page) that there are no opportunities to reach back to previous ideas and trace the tracks forward to the present moment of reading. Thus, one is forced to consider these sentences simply as they are, the spaces between the sentences becoming as important as what the sentences themselves seem to signify. The three sentences shift from highly metaphorical thinking in the first sentence (words as bottomless pits) to starkly scientific description in the third (lizards emerge from stones and the stones change colors). The second sentence exhibits both metaphorical and literal thinking, but the truly interesting part of it comes in its reference to some "it" that is wholly unsupported by the previous sentence. On a quick reading of the three sentences, "it" seems to refer back to "a word." Both are singular, and under normal circumstances, the grammar would work out. (For example: A word is a bottomless pit. It cannot be "filled" with meaning.) However, as the second sentence unfolds we are led further and further away from the possibility that "word" is the antecedent to "it." First, the shift in verb tense from the present to the past alerts us that an entirely new action is taking place. We know through the phrase "it became" that something went through a precise process of transformation, this precision enhanced by the phrase "one day," which indicates a single moment on a set timeline and is at odds with the time-less "is" of the first sentence. The sentence also invokes an individual perceiving consciousness to have witnessed the events of the "one day." Both of these time-sensitive phrases work to sever conclusively the "it" of sentence 2 from the "word" of sentence 1, so that we are left with a gap both in the logic that connects the two sentences to each

other and in the signification of the word “it.” In fact, there is really no way of knowing what “it” refers to. At this point in the overall narrative of the book, the text tends to describe childhood events, with references in this and following sections to her parents, to toys, to school⁴⁰, so it seems possible that some natural event occurred in which a football-sized stone fell out of something else, an event that from a child’s perspective seemed magical. The logic leading to the next sentence appears to be associational, the magical stone of sentence 2 leading to the very real and present stones of sentence 3.⁴¹ And though the narrative voice describes these new stones in a rather impressionistic instead of scientific way (focusing just on the color instead of the fact of the moss receding), we remain, nevertheless, in the physical world.

As the above analysis shows, the “logic” of Hejinian’s text is a logic of gaps, of absences, of spaces between, in part because of how highly Hejinian valued metonymy’s “paratactic perspective.” The poetic technique of parataxis completely dismisses logical connections between terms or sentences, allowing for the individual elements to take on a perhaps more vibrant life of their own. The role of the author is less about creating a unified whole and more about providing the tools of the creation itself—here, the heap of sentences. Imagine a connect-the-dots picture. The whole image emerges only when the spaces between the dots are dutifully filled by a child with a pencil who can follow them in the order specified by the numbers. The dots themselves are vital, but ultimately unable *on their own* to contribute to the larger whole without being connected to the next dot in a precise way. A paratactical connect-the-dots image,

⁴⁰ Despite the predominance of the references to “tangible” memories of people and events, we are never without a strange, poetic commentary on the world at large, as in “One is growing up repeatedly” (32) or “A cold but exhibiting hypothesis” (26).

⁴¹ Hilary Clark has convincingly argued that *My Life* shares a structural method with traditional mnemonics, or memory techniques, which depend on associational triggers to “retrieve” remembered ideas. She argues that though *My Life* is chronological as a whole, it is largely a “synchronous” text in which “the reader rests upon each moment of perception” (Clark 322). The dismissal of these antecedent relationships provides support for this type of reading.

however, might present the dots without the corresponding numbers, so that though there might be a complete image imagined by the artist, the child with the pencil will no doubt draw something entirely different by connecting the dots in his own way.⁴²

In terms of a paratactically arranged text like *My Life*, we might think of each sentence as a dot and the spaces between the sentences as the space on a connect-the-dots page where the lines that form the eventual completed image are to go. That is, in this analogy, in order for the completed “life” to become meaningful, a reader must make vital, authorial decisions about how to connect the sentences so that some sort of “image” or life emerges. And it is important to point out here that without strict instructions on how this is to be accomplished, each reader becomes her own author and, through the process of free variation, turns “my life” into “a life.”

***My Life* and Husserl’s Eidetic Reduction**

“My aunt, holding up the little letter I had written, insisted that the act of writing-down was testimonial and that the writing would always be used as proof of what I held to be true” (46). Hejinian’s aunt seems to serve as a foil here to the creative reading and writing potentials that have been explored so far in *My Life*. Language becomes solid, according to the aunt. Once written down, the past is weighted with the girth of permanence. It becomes, here, Truth. Hejinian seems to resist this idea, in part by using the word “insisted” to describe her aunt’s claim. It is as if she did not believe these words then, and does not now, so that the aunt is forever making her claim against its alternative. As these lines are read, readers must recall the “written-down testimonial” of *My Life*, whose Truth is scattered and unkempt. Despite the aunt’s

⁴² Though I have been unable to implement this yet due to teaching schedules, I hope to be able to allow students to “connect the dots” of Hejinian’s life in an explicitly active and creative way. The proposed lesson would involve a discussion of Hejinian’s method and the reader’s role in such a text, followed by a writing activity in which students write their own sentences to fit in between Hejinian’s, thus shifting “her” life to “their” life, her text to their text.

absolute faith in the stability of words written down, readers know the value of the gaps in the process, gaps that will always be in the process of being filled in but which will never be filled. The autobiographical life will never be lived.

Resistance to the aunt's grand proclamation, then, comes in the form of a loosely bound, ever growing autobiography, in which the "proof of what I held to be true" would never hold up in logical syllogism, but rather must be imagined, created, intended. Because of the space created in this text for collaborative and imaginative creativity in the reading process, I find Edmund Husserl's concept of the eidetic reduction to be an illuminative tool in articulating the ways in which the metonymic form of the text reshapes the possibilities of the "language self." In particular, Husserl's third reduction⁴³ shows how *My Life* shifts from the actual life of Lyn Hejinian to the possible life of, really, anyone. In part, this is because the eidetic reduction focuses exclusively on the perceiving subject's ability to *imagine* the perceived object so that the object itself is loosed from its spatiotemporal bonds, shifting out of the actual—I perceive and intend this thing—and into the possible—I can imagine this thing existing.

Husserl's eidetic reduction revolves around the subject's exploration of "pure possibility" as an alternative to immediate "acceptance" of a thing's being (70). Such a mental process reinforces the phenomenological claim that perceived objects are intended as part of the subject's consciousness—a reminder that we cannot perceive an object unaffected by our own mental processes. Hejinian's understanding of the meaning of "self"—the intentional object of autobiography—reflects this idea. She writes in her essay "The Person and Description" that the idea of "self" is actually a realization of contingency, of the possibility that one could not be. The

⁴³ The first reduction, the phenomenological reduction, was meant to strip the object of consciousness from all elements of it that were transcendent so that one was able to reflect on it purely as a phenomena of consciousness. The second reduction was called the transcendent reduction. In this reduction, the ego itself became the focus of reflection. Suzanne Cunningham writes, though, that the distinction between these reductions was never entirely clear in Husserl's writings (8).

self, she argues, is not an entity apart from and unaffected by the subject's perception of it, but, rather, is contingent on that very perception: "That comes first: the perceiving of something, not in parts but whole, as a situation with a projection of possibilities. The recognition of those possibilities follows and constitutes one's first exercise *of* possibility, and on that depends one's realization that oneself is possible" (202-03, emphasis in original).

Husserl's eidetic reduction, then, explores potentialities—not the cup of coffee right here in front of me, but rather everything that could be changed and still result in my perceiving it as a cup of coffee. That is, what are all the possible ways in which I can perceive something as a coffee cup? In Husserl's words, "We, so to speak, shift the actual perception into the realm of non-actualities, the realm of the as-if, which supplies us with 'pure' possibilities, pure of everything that restricts to this fact or to any fact whatever. As regards the latter point, we keep the aforesaid possibilities, not as restricted even to the co-positing *de facto* ego, but just as a completely free 'imaginableness' of phantasy" (70). Husserl calls this entire process "free variation," in which, without spatiotemporal restriction, we imagine, or, one might say, fantasize about all the possible versions of a thing that could possibly be intended within our subjective consciousness. Suzanne Cunningham explains Husserl's eidetic reduction in the following way: "By varying the objects of perception [...] and noting the elements of the act of perceiving which remain constant regardless of their object, or as Husserl tells us, by merely imagining ourselves as perceiving, cutting all ties with actuality and moving by fantasy into the realm of pure possibility, one arrives at perception, of 'the universal type,' the 'pure *eidōs*.'" Cunningham specifies, though, that during this reduction, one is not looking for a "universal entity," but rather is looking for "a set of minimum necessary conditions for the possibility of conscious experience of the sort under investigation [...] the necessary conditions for the possibility of any conscious

experience at all” (10). Important to note is the fact that the eidetic reduction, while seemingly outward-directed to the perceived object, in fact reveals possible contingencies for the perceiving subject. Husserl explains this in the following way: “With each eidetically pure type we find ourselves, not indeed inside the *de facto* ego, but *inside an eidos ego*, a pure possibility-variant of my *de facto* ego” (71, emphasis in original). The eidetic reduction, then, establishes modes of possibility for perceived objects, but also develops a conception of “this ego itself qua possibility” (71). If the perceived object within an autobiographical project is the life and self of the author, then to perform an eidetic reduction on it is to not only reveal all the possible configurations of the author’s life, but all the possible configurations of the life of the reader *as perceiving subject*. Both the author’s life and the reader’s life become possible lives.

We can see a sort of eidetic reduction occurring in *My Life* explicitly in places in which the text shifts from highly personal sentences bound to very particular circumstances to more general sentences that comment without the restriction of the autobiographical “I.” For example, the section that begins with the tag “Like plump birds along the shore” opens with sentences that see-saw back and forth between the personal and the general:

Summers were spent in a fog that rains. They were mirages, no different from those that camelback riders approach in the factual accounts of voyages in which I persistently imagined myself, and those mirages on the highway were for me both impalpable souvenirs and unstable evidence of my own adventures, now slightly less vicarious than before. The person too has flared ears, like an infant’s reddened with batting. I had claimed the radio nights for my own. There were more storytellers than there were stories, so that everyone in the family had a version of history and it was impossible to get to the original, or to know “what

really happened.” The pair of ancient, stunted apricot trees yielded ancient, stunted apricots. What was the meaning hung from that depend. The sweet taste of artichokes. The lobes of autobiography. (27)

The explicitly autobiographical sentences, such as the one about Hejinian’s fascination with mirages, draw readers into the life of the author. They serve as anchors of sorts, seemingly factual moments which after reading we can say with confidence, “yes, I now understand something about Lyn Hejinian.” The juxtaposition of these sentences with others that do not necessarily reference Hejinian’s past allow for the text’s governing antecedent—Lyn Hejinian’s (My) Life—to fade in and out of referential stability, thus resisting her aunt’s claim of “truth” for whatever is written down. “The sweet taste of artichokes,” for example, works in subtly different ways from the “stunted apricot trees.” The trees are extra-ordinary, and through that particularity become localized. Hejinian seems to remember a particular set of trees yielding a particular kind of fruit. The artichokes, however, are utterly ordinary. The noun is untethered from autobiography, assigned an adjective (sweet) with a degree of objectivity, so that it means without the historical Lyn Hejinian to stand behind it. And yet, it is a part of *someone’s* perceived experience. Artichokes are not “sweet” without a tongue to taste them. Hejinian’s text thus provides readers opportunities, within the autobiographical reading experience, to turn what initially reads as “the memories of Lyn Hejinian about her life” into “memories of a life.” As Cunningham explains, this shift is exactly what the eidetic reduction is all about. “It is,” she writes, “the move from the level of individual experience to that of the essence of experience that gives the investigation its validity” (60).

Through its focus on what is possible instead of what is merely actual, the eidetic reduction becomes the most creative aspect of the phenomenological project. However, though

Husserl wants to find the “pure possible” through the reduction, I would argue that such unadulterated potential is impossible. One does not imagine new possibilities *ex nihilo*, but imagines new possibilities out of previous actualities. Husserl argues for a blending of passive and active intentionality during the process of eidetic reductions. He writes, “we can...penetrate into the intentional constituents of experiential phenomena themselves...and thus find intentional references leading back to a ‘history’ and accordingly making these phenomena knowable as formations subsequent to other, essentially antecedent formations” (79). I want to focus on his use of the word *antecedent* in this explanation. In this rendering of the intentional process, Husserl makes plain the way that past intentional activity shapes present and future intentional activity by comprising a “history” or “antecedent.” That is, when new phenomena are intended in consciousness, we “mak[e] these phenomena knowable” by referring back to the historical antecedent of previously knowable phenomena. Again, the newly imagined *possible* is not accessible to us in the eidetic reduction without the benefit of the previously known *actual*.

Cunningham explains in her study of Husserl’s phenomenology that the passive/active structure of meaning constitution depends on language for its proper function because it is through language that we are able to connect one perception to the other, forming relationships that eventually can develop into the possible elements of the eidetic reduction. She writes, “This constitution takes place both in the coining of new words for freshly interpreted experience, and in the expansion of the levels of meaning associated with previously constituted words. Meaning-intention is not, then, a purely referential act [...], but is likewise at times a creative one; consciousness can both intend already-constituted meanings and constitute new ones” (53). This blending of “already-constituted meanings” with new meanings that Cunningham highlights as part of the eidetic reduction seems particularly important to any reduction performed in the

context of the reading process, in which imagined possibilities are a function of language provided by the author. In this way, then, the eidetic reduction in *My Life* highlights the way language functions in both passive, receptive ways and active, creative ways. We function more on the receiving end when we read about Hejinian's personal interest in mirages, but more on the active end when we read about the general sweetness of artichokes. The disconnect between the provided "antecedents" and the new meanings we are to make out of them turns this autobiography into the truly creative process that it is. In her essay "If Written is Writing," however, Hejinian demonstrates that there is not a firm and clear distinction between these active and passive processes, in that language's provision of words shapes the kinds of lives we can imagine: "[I]n such are we obsessed with our own lives, which lives being now language, the emphasis has moved. The emphasis is persistently centric, so that where once one sought a vocabulary for ideas, now one seeks ideas for vocabularies" (27). As a gloss on this idea, in her introduction to the essay in *The Language of Inquiry*, she writes, "I wanted to propose writing as a material manifestation, an embodiment, of desire for reality. This desire drives us backward into the past as well as forward; that is, the reality we desire precedes us, we remember it" (26). It must then be in these present moments—between the past and the future, or between the preceding and next sentence—that we find the possibility of our desired reality.

Phenomenology seems particularly suited to a discussion of disrupted antecedents in poetry in part because it, like language, is temporally bound to a situated, perceiving subject, whether that subject is gradually taking in a perceived object or moving her eyes across the page, receiving and creating relationships among words. This *temporal* constitution of meaning, Cunningham writes, holds that we intend over time, and that for things to become meaningful for us, we must be able to use retention (holding of the immediate past in our present mind—as one

does with notes of a song) and protention, the ability to anticipate future elements of some perceptual experience (anticipating the next note of a song) (45-46). Without the simultaneity of retention and protention, then, we would have no way of making sense of our perceptions. Cunningham further explains that language is a necessary part of both retention and protention: it is necessary for us to reach beyond the individual object in front of us—the actual—and to generalize about all possible variations—the possible. In fact, we cannot imagine a possible future without the benefit of language. We cannot create new meanings out of our immediate present and the things in that present without using language to reach into an already known past and then to reach forward into an unknown and thus only imagined future. Without language, we are bound entirely to actual things and are severed utterly from the world of imagined possibility.

This neatly described system of retention and protention is not without its messy terrors, however. Amid this process, we encounter gaps, moments at which the things that we previously understood suddenly do not match up with what we encounter, when the past does not prepare us for the onslaught of the future. “The gap,” we learn in *My Life*, “indicated that objects or events had been forgotten, that a place was being held for them, should they chance to reappear” (41). The “chance” in this sentence should remind us of the “inadequacy of the language” the poet must rely on. There is no guarantee that these objects of memory will resurface, bubbling up into the language of daily use. And thus do we “lose” portions of our past, finding ourselves unable to use all that we have experienced to help us create the future. In *My Life*, Hejinian offers a sort of solace to this terror, though one that dismisses the vibrancy of creative possibility that so marks the eidetic reduction: “So I rebelled against worlds of my own construction and withdrew into the empirical world surrounding me” (91). The words *rebelled* and *withdrew* here indicate that the removal of oneself from creative life into a sort of pure actuality must be a conscious act, that

we are perhaps always already within the process of constructing and creating. In part, I would argue that our persistently languaged lives demand such consciousness, as our perceptions of the world around us, argue both Hejinian and Cunningham, *are* languaged perceptions. Even Hejinian's poetic withdrawal into the "empirical world" will necessarily be shaped by language (not to mention described in a sentence in a poem).

Despite the rebellion offered at this moment in *My Life*, these gaps in the creative process are necessary to the functioning of the process itself. It is in those gaps that we become not just the receivers of a language already finished, but creators of a language perpetually in the process of being born. In an autobiographical text such as *My Life*, this gap between retention and protention seems especially fraught—"We will only understand what we have already understood" (73)—in part because the autobiographical author writes of the past self while in the process of forming that self. As long as autobiography can be written, it can never be finished. In the first section of the book, which opens with the return of a "younger, thinner" father from war, Hejinian writes, "*That morning this morning*" (9). The tiny fragment, a mere four words, crystallizes the entirety of any autobiographical project: how to write about a past moment in the present moment when the interpreter of that past moment has not yet fully been shaped by it. Or, how to write about the past (always already languaged) self when that (languaged) self is fragmented, filled with holes.

As we focus on the way that language shapes the creative possibilities of perception, particularly the eidetic reduction I see Hejinian performing on the autobiographical life, we return to the role that readers play in the creation of this life. As I argued earlier in this chapter, because of the way metonymy functions in *My Life*, readers are responsible for actively forging the antecedent connections between texts, creative them out of the gaps left by the author. It is

through the passive reception of language from the author (a form of retention) and the active creation of meaning by the reader (a form of protention) that the self—Hejinian's in particular and the idea of self in general—is intended and constituted in this text. Put another way, the *possibility* of the self here depends on relationships among intending, perceiving subjects. Thus we return to phenomenological considerations of intersubjectivity. For Hejinian, the very existence of the self *depends on* intersubjective relationships with others. She writes in “The Person and Description,” “It is in the exercise of that possibility that one inescapably acknowledges others, which have in fact already been admitted when and as one initially perceived something. And the exercise of possibilities (including that of consciousness) amid conditions and occasions constitutes a person” (203). As I argued above, the “exercise of possibilities” that here “constitute a person” functions always within language. Because language is always both received and created, it is always already an intersubjective activity—we cannot receive language without encountering others. Self, then, perceived and constituted in language, is intersubjective.

Of course, Husserl, rejects this kind of group construction of self, insisting throughout the *Meditations* that the perceiving subject can somehow separate himself from the world in which he lives and remain “above” it during the process of free variation. He writes, “Along with other Egos, naturally, I lose all the formations pertaining to sociality and culture. In short, not just corporeal Nature but the whole concrete surrounding life-world is for me, from now on, only a phenomenon of being, instead of something that is” (Husserl 19). Because he renders all perceived objects as phenomena of the perceiving consciousness he rejects everything that, in his analysis, is “outside” of that consciousness—namely, all other perceiving subjects. However, Cunningham argues that if one is to imagine the necessary conditions for an object to be

constituted as such within consciousness, one must be able to generalize about that object, to free oneself from spatiotemporal limitations, and that one can only do so using language: “If I am to predicate, to generalize, to idealize my experience in order that I may uncover what is universal and necessary in it, I must use language—and I must have some criterion by which to evaluate the consistency of that use. That criterion can only be found in an existing intersubjective context which is not simply a product of my meaning-constituting but is likewise one of the conditions for the possibility of that very constitution” (73). Johanna Oksala explains further that, “By means of others, the objects of my constitutive experiences are provided with a validity that lends them independence with respect to me. Thus the categories of transcendence, objectivity and reality are intersubjectively constituted, meaning that they can only be constituted by a subject that has experienced other subjects” (234). In other words, the very process of object constitution, which is the basic phenomenological process through which we perceive and interpret the world around us, depends on intersubjective relationships with others. The reason for this dependency, she explains, is that “[w]e can only identify something as something by using linguistically mediated conceptual determinations, and our experiences therefore always have linguistic, sociocultural and historical conditions of possibility” (233-34). Thus, the very processes by which we determine possible conditions for an object’s constitution depend on intersubjective experiences, something we’ve seen occurring throughout the eidetic reduction of *My Life*. In a way, then, “my” life becomes “our” life.

***My Life* as an “Open Text”**

Because of the non-hierarchical structure of the metonymic relationships in *My Life*, readers gain something of an equal footing with the author. Though Lyn Hejinian offers the raw

material of the autobiography in the form of words, sentences and sections, readers construct those raw materials into a their own version of a “whole,” building bridges between them and deciding which textual elements function as antecedents to other textual elements. Because of the freedom offered by the metonymic structure, the life offered in the text becomes not an actual life, but a possible life. That is, as I argued above, *My Life* enacts Edmund Husserl’s eidetic reduction in language, with readers stepping in as the perceiving, intending subjects, the ones who imagine all possible configurations of a life.

My analysis of *My Life* as an eidetic reduction based on its metonymical structure is meant, in some ways, to bring together the phenomenological understanding of the subject’s individual perception of the world with a more community-oriented understanding with language at its core. Because language must be given to us (retention) in order for us to create new ideas with it (protention), the incorporation of language into our perceptive processes automatically assumes the presence of the perceiving subject within a community of like subjects. In some ways, then, the truly creative opportunities offered to the reader of *My Life* become moments in which the reader’s creative, perceptive subjectivity is brought to the forefront, made equal to the authors’ so that two subjects meet in the process of mutual self-creation—as in, creation of *a* self, not creation of *my* self (or, one could say, a creation of “selfing”).

Because, as I’ve argued, the poem emphasizes the possibilities of the languaged self instead of the actualities of a received self, the “gap” that exists between the language of the text and whatever “real” self there can be said to exist (if any) is heightened. Indeed, Hejinian has argued that our reliance on language for the categories with which we frame our world actually highlights the language gap:

Because we have language we find ourselves in a special and peculiar relationship to the objects, events, and situations which constitute what we imagine of the world. Language generates its own characteristics in the human psychological and spiritual conditions. Indeed, it nearly *is* our psychological condition.

This psychology is generated by the struggle between language and that which it claims to depict or express, by our overwhelming experience of the vastness and uncertainty of the world and by what often seems to be the inadequacy of the imagination that longs to know it—and, furthermore, for the poet, the even greater inadequacy of the language that appears to describe, discuss, or disclose it. (“Rejection of Closure” 49)

So, though we are always already in a state of languaged experience, we are simultaneously always already faced with the unknown, with things just beyond what is sayable and yet just within reach of what is possible. I would argue that the antecedent gaps in *My Life* that have informed this project depict both the terror and the excitement of the unsayable and the possible. Our reading of Hejinian’s languaged life brings us face to face with our own languaged lives and through such a reduction we become conscious of the instability of the autobiographical system at large. Unstable texts like *My Life* lead to unstable and unpredictable readings, what Hejinian calls an “open text.”

In distinguishing between what she calls a “closed” text and an “open” text, Hejinian writes that a closed text “is one in which all the elements of the work are directed toward a single reading of it” (“Rejection of Closure” 42). We might think, here, of our connect-the-dots picture with the ordered numbers included. A closed text, in this rendering, is one with minimal logical ambiguity, in which every level of a text—words, phrases, sentences, paragraphs, chapters, and

so on—are organized in such a way that interpretations of work are expected and more definitive. Though readers of closed texts are active participants in the meaning-making capacity of such texts, they are much more bound to the author’s original conception. I would like to emphasize, though, that I am not suggesting here that the closed texts demand an author-centered interpretive strategy. Rather, the logic of these texts keeps us closer to the author’s authority, *even if* we have no idea who the author is or what the author intended. An open text, on the other hand, is one in which “all the elements of the work are maximally excited; here it is because ideas and things exceed (without deserting) argument that they have taken into the dimension of the work” and one that “resists the cultural tendencies that seek to identify and fix material and turn it into a product; that is, it resists reduction and commodification” (“Rejection of Closure” 43). Resistance to the commodification of a text’s meaning strongly motivates many of the Language Poets’ disruptions of traditional syntax.⁴⁴ They seek to expose and thereby avoid the “reification” of relationships between words and things that have become “natural” in a bourgeois, realist understanding of language and instead inquire into the ways that language both shapes and is shaped by community.

In this focus on community and the rejection of the stultifying processes of authority-based interpretation, it seems to me that one must pay ever more careful attention to the ways in which the reader participates in the processes of the open text. In fact, I would argue that open texts as Hejinian describes them cannot depend solely on the author’s decision to write an open text. If that were the case, then the systems of authority maintained by bourgeois “reduction and commodification” would simply be reinscribed under the guise of openness. Thus, while Hejinian offers her readers strategies for reading her *My Life*, such as declaring “all this is

⁴⁴ We might think at this point of the two sentences about the lamp I compared on pages 39-40 of my introductory chapter: Bernstein’s “The lamp sits atop the table in the study” and Stein’s “A lamp is the only sign of glass.”

metonymy,” she does not make demands. She in fact writes a text that, as I argued, can be read any of its different published editions without losing any of its substance.

Umberto Eco offers a description of an open text that elegantly emphasizes the role that both readers and authors must play in the creation of it, showing that the loss of either results in the loss of openness. Linking the idea of the open text to the concept of the “field” in modern physics, Eco argues in *The Role of the Reader* that in creating an open text the author creates a field of relationships that eschews traditional linear notions of cause and effect. What is offered instead is “a complex interplay of motive forces [...], a configuration of possible events, a complete dynamism of structure” (58). For Eco, the alternative to traditional linear organization is not complete chaos, but rather a set of combinations and relationships offered to the reader: “the *work in movement* is the possibility of numerous different personal interventions, but it is not an amorphous invitation to indiscriminate participation. The invitation offers the performer the chance of an oriented insertion into something which always remains the world intended by the author” (62). Eco’s reference to *performance* here is in part a function of his interest in the musical version of an open text with which he opens his chapter on the topic, but it does highlight the uniqueness of each reading experience when both the reader and the author are dedicated to the shared task of textual creation. An open reading and writing of *My Life*, for example, will not result in an interpretation of the poem as a commentary on the possibility of alien life in the universe. What it does offer is a series of metonymic relationships—based on a combination of signifying elements—which the reader arranges and creates through an eidetic reduction of the idea of a single life.

The connection between Husserl’s eidetic reduction and the open text offered to us by Hejinián is an important one, as together they offer a revision to the Language Poets’ conception

of poetry as revolution. By *revision*, though, I do not mean a process of improvement, as one does with, say, a dissertation chapter. Rather, I mean *revision* in the literal sense, revision as a *re-seeing*, a seeing again. The open text becomes, in Eco's language (inherited from physicists) a *field* in which hierarchies of meaning are dismissed in favor of play and silence. What is *re-seen* is the Language poets' intense focus on grammar as the primary method by which language—and thus our understanding of the world at large—is controlled. Grammar, writes Steve McCaffery, is ultimately a repressive aspect of the signifying system, one that codifies language and binds it to a producer/consumer relationship reminiscent of the capitalist mode of production. In his essay "From the Notebooks," published in *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book*, he writes, "Grammar, as repressive mechanism, regulates the free circulation of meaning (the repression of polysemeity into monosemeity and guided towards a sense of meaning as accumulated, as surplus value of signification)" and "Grammar is invested precisely because of the expected profit rate viz. a clarity through sequence carried into meaning" (160). Charles Bernstein similarly writes that "sentences that follow standard grammatical patterns allow the accumulating references to enthrall the reader by diminishing diversions from a constructed representation" ("Semblance" 116). An overreliance on grammatically correct sentences, then, leads to the idea that correct grammar is in some way "natural," that ungrammatical sentences are not only "wrong," but in fact "unnatural." Since grammar is often thought by everyday language users to be a nothing more than a set of rules taught within the confines of a formal education, grammar becomes a repressive reality, one that only certain people—those who have mastered its rules—have access to. Language rendered in this way is dead, lacking the vitality that comes with experimentation and play. In addition, this type of language is something one

merely receives, like one receives one's genetic code, giving it—and those who claim authority over it—power over those who presume to create written text.

The alternative to the passive reception of grammatically correct language, then, is to focus on language usage as the creation of meaning, as production instead of consumption. When this occurs, writing becomes, as Bruce Andrews characterizes it, praxis. When writing is considered as praxis, meanings are not received from a previously established and reified system of signification (McCaffery's grammar-centered language); rather, meanings are actively created during the reading and writing process. Andrews highlights the social nature of writing as praxis, since to consider it as such exposes all the social relationships contained within the signifying process. He writes, "The praxis involves a contextualizing of the text, a pointing of the text beyond itself, and a remapping of the subject (the position of the author, the position of the reader) in terms *of* that larger interaction between writing and this social body (of meaning)" ("Total Equals What" 42). Andrews' ideas here reflect the Language poets' relationship with Roman Jakobson's linguistics: "There is no such thing as private property in language; everything is socialized" (Jakobson 249). The reading and writing subjects in this rendering thus become sites of interpretation and creativity, moveable, malleable loci of activity that, because of their vibrancy, cannot be pinned down and oppressed by formal systems of control.

Though *My Life* is primarily written within the confines of correct grammar at the sentence level, the antecedent disruptions I've been considering allow the reading of the poem to take place outside of the confines of a repressive system of authority while keeping at bay the chaos of a completely undifferentiated reality. In "The Rejection of Closure," Hejinian writes that the function of language is to enable us to differentiate one thing from another in the universe at large. Without language, the universe is left in chaos amid which we would be utterly

lost. The reason language is able to do this is its “incapacity ... to match the world.” Because of this incapacity, this gap, we are able to “distinguish our ideas and ourselves from the world and things in it from each other” (56). In this, Hejinian seems to suggest, perhaps implicitly, that without language, we are left unable to articulate the concept of having a self that is apart from the world at large, which includes other selves doing the same exact thing. So, while the grammar resisted by McCaffery is indeed a false ordering system, it is false only in the sense that it can never align completely with the world created by it. The danger is in adherence to any system of reification that refuses to acknowledge that intrinsic gap. Hejinian writes further in “The Rejection of Closure” that “[t]he undifferentiated is one mass, the differentiated is multiple. The (unimaginable) complete text, the text that contains everything, would in fact be a closed text. It would be insufferable” (56). Openness here is possibility, in that only when things are unsayable is there a perpetual possibility of saying. The eidetic reduction emphasizes this idea, dwelling always in the open field of possible relations, rejecting the myth of totality associated with the actual.

The metonymic arrangement of *My Life* emphasizes this open possibility, both in what is said and what is left unsaid: “When I wake up in the morning and it’s raining, I feel like rolling in the mud. I was eventually to become one person, gathered up maybe, during a pause, at a comma” (33). The first sentence here is what one might call a traditional autobiographical sentiment: *These are things I feel and like. In reading this sentence, you will learn more about me*. The “I” of this sentence is, perhaps, more of a closed I, in that its expression differentiates Hejinian from others who may not relish the thought of rolling around in mud on a rainy day. Hejinian becomes more defined through this sentence, in that limits are placed around her, separating her from mud-haters everywhere. The combination of this first sentence with the next,

though, metonymically exposes the fragility of such definite boundaries. Now, as “one person”—unified, whole—she is “gathered up” precisely at the moment of silence, the moment of the pause. Such a unified and whole “I” cannot exist amid reality differentiated and defined by language. The “I” of the second sentence has thus become something the “I” of the first sentence can never be. Only in the silence of the pause is the person indeed “one.”

Later in *My Life*, Hejinian writes, “If words matched their things we’d be imprisoned within walls of symmetry” (98) and, a few pages later, “To give the proper term for an object or idea is to describe its end” (101). Her first statement here echoes the ideas she explores in “The Rejection of Closure” and which I see playing out in the eidetic reduction of *My Life*, namely, that the most thrilling part of the poetical and phenomenological enterprises is that because words do not “match[] their things,” we—writers, readers, users of language in general—find space in which to imagine and create the perceived thing constituted in our phenomenological experience. Put another way, if words provided us total access to the *actual*, there would be no space left over for the ever-changing, ever-growing *possible*, and we’d find ourselves imprisoned within the actual. Within this context, Hejinian’s second statement here makes sense: the “end” of an idea is the point at which there are no more *possible* things that can be said of it, no more *possible* ways in which the idea can change and grow in the imagination of the intending consciousness. Thus, if the “proper terms” “matched their things,” we’d be at an end of the possible. The use of the word “end” here should remind us of Gertrude Stein’s definition of the noun as the name of a thing: “A name is adequate or it is not. If it is adequate then why go on calling it, if it is not then calling it by its name does no good....As I say a noun is a name of a thing, and therefore slowly if you feel what is inside that thing you do not call it by the name by which it is known” (*LIA* 210). Stein is describing here what could be called the “end” of a thing,

something that is so known from the “inside” that there is no reason to name it—to institute the language gap—any longer. And though she and Hejinian would no doubt disagree about whether a thing can be known from the inside without language, we do see in both the acknowledgment of the way the word cannot match the thing.⁴⁵

Hejinian’s ultimate assessment of the language gap is resoundingly ambivalent, for while valuing the way this gap allows for open readings and open texts, she also accepts, with some resignation, the inherent terror that accompanies any system so forthright about its own failings:

In the gap between what one wants to say (or what one perceives there is to say) and what one can say (what is sayable), words provide for a collaboration and a desertion. We delight in our sensuous involvement with the materials of language, we long to join words to the world—to close the gap between ourselves and things—and we suffer from doubt and anxiety because of our inability to do so.
(“Rejection of Closure” 56)

Let us deal with the bad news first. Words provide a “desertion.” Hejinian does say from what, but we might assume at this point that the desertion is from the perceived world, so that simultaneous with our perception of the world and the meaning we make out of it is our loss of the world. Desertion would suggest some sort of deliberate abandonment, though this of course is not the case. We do not choose to use language to make the world mean; we simply have language thrust upon us. Despite the choicelessness of this language game the result is

⁴⁵ In a move that makes one wonder about whether Hejinian has been messing with us this whole time, she offers as a follow up to the second quoted sentence a statement that must—*must*—be logically connected to the previous. The two sentences together read: “To give the proper term for an object or idea is to describe its end. The same holds for music, which also says nothing” (101). If we allow the “same” of the second sentence to be the giving of the proper term of the first, which is risky, then we find here the possibility of words that cannot signify in the way music cannot signify. Despite Stein’s admonishment that “words must always mean,” (“Transatlantic Interview” 18), here we see the loss of meaning connected explicitly to the closure of the gap. Does music resist the gap language depends on?

necessarily, Hejinian claims, “doubt and anxiety.” The gap exposed between ourselves and the world, ourselves and others, ourselves and ourselves, cannot be sutured back together, no matter how open the text or meaningful the language. Language, it seems, is in part responsible for isolation and loneliness—for providing ways to signify togetherness even amid its loss.

Thankfully, Hejinian provides us more than absolute despair at our languaged state. She offers as a companion to desertion the idea of collaboration. In using language, we work with others always, both through the reception of previously received ideas on the one hand and the creation of new ideas (for ourselves and others) on the other. In any event, we necessarily always share in the “sensuous involvement with the materials of language,” no matter how deserted from the world we may ultimately feel. In fact, it is only amid the anxiety of the desertion that we, within our collaboration, work mightily to *close the gap*. Might this be offered as a definition of any language-based art form—the endless, fruitless attempt to make our words match our world?

In devotion to the open creativity I see occurring in *My Life*, I would maintain that there can be no “best” or “right” interpretation of it because the relationships among the various parts of the poem are so obviously created by the reading subject. And it is in this interpretive experience that the poem as *autobiography* becomes that much more fascinating. For while I can argue with little trouble that the logical “failings” of this poem allow for readers to utilize the gaps in the poem for their own purposes, the poem is still about a life, a life that has been recalled in some way, by one person, so that it is called “My” Life, not “A” Life. Readers, especially first-time readers, will no doubt assume that Lyn Hejinian the person, in at least some fashion, stands behind the life presented in the pages of the book. This assumption stems, in part, from the “autobiographical pact” outlined by Philippe Lejeune, which ensures that the author,

narrator and protagonist of an autobiography are the same person (Lejeune 5). The “I” in such texts points back to the subjectivity of the author—the historical Lyn Hejinian—thus endowing the text with a perpetual and stable antecedent. Lejeune’s definition of autobiography—“a retrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his own existence, where the focus is his individual life” (4)—seems, in some ways, to work well here. Critics of *My Life* in general acknowledge that the book does make stable references to moments of Hejinian’s life, that there is, amid the gaping chaos, a semi-chronological portrait of a middle-class woman who attends school, finds jobs, marries, and raises children.

And yet, taking seriously the assertions by both Bruce Andrews and Roman Jakobson above that language is always already socialized requires that we simultaneously loose the bonds of “my” from its singular possessive function, opening it up into an orgy of autobiographical signification. Stephanie Sandler notes that Hejinian’s use of pronouns (both within and beyond *My Life*) lacks “inevitability”: “‘she’ and ‘he’ appear in grammatical substitutions as easily as in claims about unnamed persons” (Sandler 29). Both Craig Douglas Dworkin and Sehjae Chun have claimed, as I did regarding Stein’s *Stanza in Meditation*, that the reader is given the opportunity to step in as the antecedent to the text’s personal pronouns, becoming the one who “possesses” the titular “life.” Chun calls this process one of “hermeneutic confusion,” and writes that the text “opens up the possibility that ‘My father’ may be everyone’s, especially the reader’s father, through the reading process” (9). I would add to these wonderful readings that the opportunity for the reader to read herself into the text is not simply a “confusion” of interpretation or signification, but is, rather, a moment of the reader gaining autobiographical subjectivity. Saying “I” in reference to oneself is a way of declaring oneself a subject, and an open text like *My Life* allows for such a saying precisely by revising the traditional

autobiographical standards that insist Lyn Hejinian the historical person must stand in for the “I” at every occurrence. When any reader can, at any reading, become the subjective “I,” then the text can become, at any reading, a meeting of subjects, an intersubjective meeting. As I argued in chapter 1, the confusion of pronouns offered by these autobiographical texts leads to a situation in which the reader’s self can become confused with the author’s self, in which the “I” can speak for anyone and thus anyone can become the speaking voice of the text. In fact, Hejinian seems to suggest in the poem itself that she values the possibility that the reader might share the subjective experience of the text: “I found myself dependent on a pause, a rose, something on paper. It is a way of saying, I want you, too, to have this experience, so that we are more alike, so that we are closer, bound together, sharing a point of view—so that we are ‘coming from the same place’” (28). The notions of “sharing a point of view” and “coming from the same place” here are important, as they suggest that individual, unique points of perception can in fact be shared, be fused into one so that the subjective process itself becomes available not just to one subject, but to many. The unclear connection with the previous sentence—rather reminiscent of William Carlos Williams’ “Red Wheelbarrow”—helps us resist the temptation to interpret these two phrases as colloquialisms for little more than sharing an opinion. Rather, she is interested in perceptions and experiences of the world. Experiences cannot be *shared* in the way that opinions, such as a love of pizza, can be shared. That is, perception is always bound to the perceiving subject. The lack of an antecedent for “you” allows the pronoun to point straight out of the text at the reader and then, in asking that the reader become “alike” the speaker, returns back to the text with a reader who now comes from the same place as the author. In these two sentences, then, we have come full circle to Gertrude Stein’s lines from *Stanzas in Meditation*, which read:

“There which is not only here but here as well as there. / They like whatever I like.” (12-13).⁴⁶

⁴⁶ See pages 79-80 of my chapter on *Stanzas in Meditation* for an analysis of these lines.

Roman Jakobson wrote that metonymy, one of the guiding tropes of *My Life*, is a trope of combination, favoring the bounty of words brought together over the limitations of the more selective metaphorical trope. I have argued that Hejinian's use of a metonymic poetics in *My Life* leads to a shift in subject matter from the actuality of one person's life to the possibility of any person's life—the eidetic reduction. In such a way, by gathering the readers into the fold of the text, Hejinian lets loose the bonds that separate one life from another, balancing the desertion of the gap with the collaboration of a shared vocabulary. When any life is possible in autobiography, all lives, all readers, collaborate in its creation.

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Chapter 3: “The comic book is the self”: The Invalidated Self in Leslie Scalapino’s Autobiographical Writing

A common move in autobiography is the inclusion, either sprinkled throughout or in a glossy mid-section, of a sampling of pictures from the author’s life. The pictures serve as a supplement to the written text, allowing readers to round out their constitution of the author in their imagination, complementing the conceptual work of the language with the visual elements of the picture. As such, the reading of autobiography is to some degree a process of working with both image and text, fusing the two together to form a composite “picture” of the writer whose self and life have been offered up on the page. Leslie Scalapino includes a number of pictures throughout *Zither & Autobiography*, one of her most explicitly autobiographical texts. However, the images that populate the first several pages of the book are not used simply to complement her written text, but actually to work against it. That is, her arrangement of these early pictures draws readers into a pattern whose endgame must be the narrative annihilation of the author. Figure 1, which occurs just before the first page, is of Scalapino “at age 7 or 8” with her mother and two sisters: Diane, who is older, and Lynne, who is younger. The next picture occurs on page 8 and is of Scalapino at age 2 holding a book. On page 9, Figure 3 shows Scalapino as an infant with her mother and older sister. In these three pictures, then, we are shown images of the author in reverse order, so that the further into the autobiography we read, the closer we get to the point at which the author will have ceased to exist. Indeed, the very next image, Figure 4 on page 11, is of Scalapino’s father, Robert A. Scalapino, looking to be in his late teens or early twenties, presumably well before the author herself was born. Though the next image returns us to Scalapino as a child (we assume; the photo is not labeled), and the final three images move *forward* in time (Scalapino at age 25, in 1985 at about age 41, and finally a picture of her

husband, Tom White), the book opens with the gradual dismissal of the image of the author alongside the gradual revelation of the life of the author in the text. Two different forms of “self-exposure” are set in conflict, a conflict we will see reflected throughout Scalapino’s writing. Scalapino uses these conflicting aspects of the text to destabilize the idea of the self being a stable, unitary, and transcendent entity linked to a particular subject position. If the textual exposure of the self includes its simultaneous dismissal, then autobiographical methods that assume the self as an always present, always distinguishable entity prove inaccurate. From a reader’s perspective, the autobiographical pact that Philippe Lejeune articulates—in which the reader is assured by the genre of the shared identity of the narrator, the textual subject, and the author—is utterly impossible, and we are once again faced with an autobiography that separates the “I” from the author.

Zither & Autobiography, in a similar manner to Lyn Hejinian’s *My Life*, is filled with small memories from Scalapino’s life—childhood traumas, conversations with friends, travel anecdotes, and so on. These events *happened, occurred, were experienced*, and as such can be traced back to an historical, “in the world” person. However, the autobiographical pact is still invalidated, because amid these moments of memory Scalapino insists that though she wrote a narrative of her life, that life is in fact silent and impossible because of how personal and interior the present moment is: “Events occur before the words; one has to translate them from a medium that is without any words. The sense that one can grasp that which is transmitting from others—is less authority-based than the ‘authority of the prior world’? [...] Present ‘events’ are more ‘subjective’ and less fixed because they exist in the present instant?” (*Zither* 36). There is hesitancy in this voice, marked by the question marks that refuse declarative truths. But this hesitancy is important to Scalapino, who sees such “truth”-ful declarations as “authority-based,”

and thus something to be resisted. What she seems to see here is a wordlessness that exists prior to the imposition of external, social authority, an unsignified silence that for her is the *present moment*. This “life” that exists only in the present moment cannot “say” anything. She writes further,

‘Life’/as occurrence as silent—or ‘not itself’ *per se*.

The writing is doing the (exact) same motions ‘conceptually’—*so that* one is not in one’s life:

So that one is not in one’s life. So it has an impossible relation to it. (*Zither* 36-37)

In spite of the delightful convolution of her syntax (here and everywhere), there is something of a distinction made between a silent “life” on the one hand, and “writing” and “one” on the other. Writing, or the process of signifying, is involved in removing oneself from one’s life—“*so that* one is not in one’s life.” I want to read this phrase quite literally and quite carefully, as it will have important ramifications for the investigation into the role comic books play in Scalapino’s conception of the self in her writing. As she writes, the present moment is silent because, for her, it is “without any words” and liberated from the “authority of the prior world” (which we could read as the cultural, languaged world). By using a spatial pronoun—in—to describe what writing does to one’s relationship to one’s own life, she indicates that the conceptual work of writing is to take one *outside* of the life so that this very relationship becomes “impossible.” We can imagine here a boundary or frame placed around the present moment of “life” and writing being the process of movement from present moment to present moment.

The spatial language here will be important throughout Scalapino’s autobiographical writing, in particular because of one of the unique ways in which she explains selfhood: “The

comic book is the self” (*Trilogy* 64). Comic books, of course, tell stories through repeated iterations of “present moments,” moments bound up in “frames” or “panels.” The stories told by comics are not composed in those present moments alone, but imagined within the space between those present moments—called the gutter—by a writing subject on the one hand and a reading subject on the other.⁴⁷ Though I will spend much more time below delving into the ways that this reader and author relationship affect Scalapino’s claim that the comic book is the self, it bears mentioning here due to the fact that the self, for Scalapino, contains both the bounded and unlanguageed present moments and the creative spaces between.⁴⁸ That is, the self becomes a sort of writing, but also a sort of reading. She asks us to consider, as she did with the juxtaposition of images and texts at the beginning of *Zither*, the complexities of a self that moves and evolves and resists ownership of either the author or reader exclusively.

Scalapino is never one to make an absolute claim and then stick to it, however. For example, in interviews with Edward Foster and Elisabeth Frost, she renders the self as the activity of seeing and as its own illusion:

The only thing that the self is then is the seeing of it, and you’re empty because you’re only seeing a thing that’s outside of yourself or the illusion that you are.
(Foster 33)

My writing is fabrication of self, of subjectivity (which itself is seen to be ‘cultural abstraction’), yet in it the ‘self’ is not separable from its own illusion. I

⁴⁷ Comic books, of course, frequently employ an artist in addition to the author. This artist, I will argue later in this paper, functions on both the author and reader sides of this binary. Interestingly, autobiographical or memoir comics, which are *not* the subject of this chapter, are usually written by an author who is also the artist. See Marjane Satrapi’s *Persepolis* or Alison Bechdel’s *Fun Home* and *Are You My Mother?*, or the family histories *Forget Sorrow* by Belle Yang and *Maus* by Art Spiegelman.

⁴⁸ There is no doubt slippage of terms in the pairing of comic books and selves in this paper. The “present moments” of comic books are in no way “unlanguageed,” as panels in comics usually contain language. Japanese comics tend to offer a much greater percentage of image-only panels, which intensifies the idea of a pure present contained in the frame.

want to get the writing to come to that point where you perceive people's motions as not separate from occurrence itself. (Frost 6)

These two renderings of the self as both seeing and illusion demonstrate the sort of phenomenology at work in Scalapino's texts. She considers selfhood as its own activity and simultaneously and illusion of itself, ultimately and forever imagined. Throughout this chapter, I link the idea of the comic book to these concepts, showing how the comic book requires a reading that acknowledges the illusory activity of self. My purpose in examining these visionary claims is to better explain how the self in Scalapino's writing can function as a genre, and in particular how readers can co-create that self specifically as readers of comic books. My previous two chapters both dealt with the intersubjective meetings that grow out of textual absence, whether those absences are the missing pronoun antecedents of Gertrude Stein's *Stanzas in Meditation* or the missing logical connections in Lyn Hejinian's *My Life*. My contention thus far has been that such absences radicalize the autobiographical reading experience, revising and re-creating the relationship between author and reader by establishing a languaged space for intersubjective encounters. Through her appropriation of the comics genre as a version of selfhood, Scalapino performs a similar move. In this chapter, I argue that Scalapino's self is a mobile, perpetually in flux process of *reader*-centered creation. This version of self will ultimately become an action without an actor, an instrument without a player: the author can no more define the signification of the space between the framed presences than the reader can draw and write the content of those present frames. Scalapino's self, it seems, exists only in its own non-existence. It is, in fact, invalidated. The comic book brings this about in two ways. First, the comic book has traditionally been an "invalid" genre, one not read by literary taste makers and thus not "valid." Second, through its perpetual repetition and reiteration as a

process of identification, the comic book suggests that all selves are simply versions of each other, the self seeing reflections of itself over and over again, amid the serial repetition of framed present moments.

I will focus my analysis of this invalidation primarily on two texts: *Zither & Autobiography* (2003) and *The Return of Painting, The Pearl and Orion: A Trilogy* (1991). Scalapino uses these two texts frequently to explore the issue of presence and absence regarding the self, moments at which the self disappears as soon as it has appeared. Though the *Trilogy* is primarily a work of fiction, and occasionally fictive prose poetry, it is sprinkled throughout with sudden intrusions of an “I” that I take to be Scalapino’s autobiographical “I,” in part because several of the narrated experiences of this “I” are identical (in substance, not language) to experiences recounted in *Zither & Autobiography*.

Throughout *Zither*, Scalapino is skeptical of memory as a way of ordering past experiences, a skepticism she surely shares with Gertrude Stein, who rejects it outright in the formation of her human mind.⁴⁹ This rejection of memory, a guiding principle for the organization of autobiography in general, stems in part from her understanding of Zen Buddhism as a way to resist the rigidity of historical or cultural causality. She writes, “An aspect of Zen practice is for the individual to undercut (highlight?), itself a conception, conception of their self so continually as to dismember their fixed relation to events, even while in the present of those events. Memory itself being only a construction (of itself), of the present also” (*Zither* 17). The “fixed relation” that Zen practice seeks to disrupt is a way of describing a positional self. That is, when one has a “fixed relation” to events then one speaks, it seems, from a limited subject position, rigid and time-bound in its definition. Such a fixed and thus stable self fixes permanently the categories of subject and object, preventing the sort of subjective sharing I’ve

⁴⁹ See page 56 in my chapter on Stein.

been writing about in this dissertation. Gereon Kopf writes of the angst of the fixed subject, “if subject and object comprise causally independent individuals, a connection between them cannot be established. In addition to this existential alienation of the self from its environment, the self experiences an existential alienation from itself” (Kopf 60). By rendering the self as in flux—as process, as action—Scalapino tries to loose the chains of entity hemming in the self and instead welcome the self into the freedom of action and apositionality. Apositionality is a concept of subjectivity that develops out of Scalapino’s Buddhist influences, and which suggests that no subject maintains a stable subjectivity over time. Her Zen practice, and in turn her writing, “undercuts” or disqualifies the fixity of self as entity.

Megan Simpson has written about the way that autobiographical Language writing by women works against the idea of the self as a stable entity, which is exactly what I claim Scalapino is doing throughout. Situating Scalapino and others within a feminist context, she writes, “‘language-oriented’ women’s poetry offers this potential of disrupting the social code as defined and maintained by patriarchal law because the subject-in-process it proposes challenges and violates (rather than duplicating, as does core-of-self poetry) the assumptions about identity, gender, language and representation upon which that social code depends” (Simpson 207). Deborah M. Mix makes similar claim regarding avant-garde and experimental writing in general by women, claiming that through a process of “self-theorization,” it resists definitions codified by those at the “center” who presume to declare what does and does not count as “different”: “These feminist experimentalist authors and texts, in their variety, in their bricolage of multiple genres, techniques, voices, and goals, refuse such a stultifying construction, relating to readers instead on ever-shifting terms” (10). Both Simpson and Mix identify here the type of back-and-forth, process-oriented renderings of self I see in Scalapino’s work. Though I am not working

from a specifically gendered perspective, the claims of resistance will remain important throughout this project, particularly when considering the way comics resist the logic of authority and history.

One of the ways this disqualification of the fixed self occurs in *Trilogy*, an occasionally autobiographical text, is through a presentation of fiction interrupted with moments of autobiography, many of which are duplicated in *Zither*. Indeed, the only way they can be read as autobiography at all is through the good luck of a reader having read *Zither*. Scalapino explains this process in *Zither* itself: “The characteristic of *Trilogy* is that single lines as paragraphs occur as if a long series—such as events from finite memory (of the individual)—but (implication of) infinite numbers of fictional events are there. // I’d just put in memories not as accounts but as finite series that gets to the point of infinite—as ‘fictional’ it can’t be remembered / isn’t memory, at all” (38). I will return to this idea of series shortly, but of note here is her decision to “fictionalize” her memories by juxtaposing them with actual fiction. She’s not writing a novelization of her own life, or an autobiographical novel. Rather, she disqualifies her memories as memories by looping them into a string of infinite fictional occurrences. Memories are necessarily finite, occurring in the mind of one person and reaching back only, at the *very* earliest, to one’s infancy. Fiction, however, stretches ever toward the infinite in its endless possibility (a claim that should have profound ramifications for the possibilities embedded in the eidetic reduction of *My Life* from chapter 2). As such, the types of autobiographies I’ve been analyzing in this project, autobiographies of the human mind, become in some ways autobiographies of the infinite poetizing of one’s life, expanding that life beyond the confines of the seventy or so years from birth to death and out into the infinite possibilities of imaginative experience. Into and amid this infinite possibility, then, is welcomed the reader, invited to

participate in the series outside of memory and in so doing participate in a revolutionary self-creation.

Memory, as I just explained, functions for Scalapino as a way of stabilizing the past, even when it is randomized and distorted in texts like *Zither*, the *Trilogy*, or Hejinian's *My Life*. When these memories are written down in language, they become permanent in some ways, and she tries to work against this permanence by examining the breaks that occur within it. In her essay "The Radical Nature of Experience," in which she analyzes work by Philip Whalen and compares it to writing by the Buddhist teacher Dōgen, Scalapino considers the ways in which language can sever a person from the precise connections that form "history." She calls this moment the moment of *disjunction*, and notes that Whalen provides this disjunction through a style inspired by the musical fugue, a form that uses a "horizontal unfolding...melodies moving over time as (if) 'history'" (6). The horizontal structure of the fugue gives it a geographical "range," which is developed in Whalen's writing, she claims, through the "choosing" of the *non sequitur*. In this form of poetry, she writes, "Only the disjunction is there: occurring by the action (of the mind making leaps and remarks, and imitating its own sound and conversation, to itself or others); but there is the backlog at the same moment that is *range* itself. An implied vast space and terrain" (6). Her focus on the use of the words "range," "space," and "terrain" here are telling ways of getting at the disorder of this kind of "horizontal" poetry, which, while not utterly chaotic, resists any sort of hierarchical ordering principles. While we may be tempted here to consider these words in terms of the "open field" of poetry espoused by Charles Olson, what Scalapino seems more interested in is poetry that exposes the unlanguage present moment at the same time that it destroys the present by "always leaping out of one's mind, not being in the same moment of one's mind there" (6). Again, we get spatial language in the word "there." I'd

argue that this use of spatial language—as opposed, for example, to the more temporal “then”—resists the urge to focus on memory, a function of time. Space, while not utterly disconnected from time, functions on a different axis of existence and therefore calls for different ordering categories. The issue then becomes how to utilize the poem as a way to create the disjunction between the “mind there” and the poem “leaping out of [it]”.

More precisely, the disjunction is a deliberate welcoming of randomness through the choice of the *non sequitur*, so that when “thought connections” are omitted, “only the disjunction is there” (6). There is an impossibility to this disjunction, something that appears to exist but simultaneously cannot exist in a way that can be experienced: “Past, present, and future occurring at the same time (wreck one’s mind) are the disjunction in which one cannot be in any instant” (7). Lyn Hejinian provides a helpful gloss of the phrase “wreck one’s mind,” writing that “Scalapino feels that it is her *obligation* to wreck mind: one’s own mind, since in exercising its powers of interpretation, it obscures experience under clouds of illusion, nullifying empirical haecceity and blinding us to reality; and the mind of others’, since in interpreting us, others perform acts of deformation and even, potentially, of destruction” (“Figuring Out” n. pag.). Writing and reading poetry, though, are themselves forms of interpretation and thus ways of “obscuring experience.” In an effort to mitigate this obscuring, Scalapino searches out the disjunction, finding it in anarchy. In *Zither*, the search for disjunction begins after a childhood realization of there being “no ‘God’ and we have to die. There is no authority anywhere or in one. // I freaked out and beginning then [at fourteen] sought (later in writing) the ‘anarchist moment’—the moment that would be only disjunction itself” (2). Once again, the loss of authority is paired with disjunction. She specifies here that authority resides neither in the external world—institutional, historical—nor in the internal world—“in one.” Authority for

Scalapino is inevitably false, an idea that will come up again in an explicitly cultural critique in the *Trilogy*. In all, the welcoming of anarchy and disjunction into texts becomes, for Scalapino, a rejection of history rendered specifically as a way of solidifying power structures within time. In rejecting those power structures, she rejects history and welcomes instead the disjunction of absolute presence: “A ‘random’ (that is, detailed, minute) speck put beside (compared to?) some other ‘random’ (minute) speck—their interrelation occurring solely changes the entirety/interiority of ‘historical’ event (that which appears to be a crux and unified); the disjunction (in *non sequitur*) occurs only as being that present-time” (“Radical Nature of Experience” 9).

The anarchy of the *non sequitur* is its randomness, its refusal to bend to an ordering system or logical principle, and it is in this anarchy that the *non sequitur* helps “invalidate” whatever Scalapino manages to write about the self. It prevents any sort of whole picture from forming, so that the self is always moving amid this disjunction. In some ways, this rejection of overt ordering systems as a way to disrupt social convention is a return to the avant-garde of Dada. Indeed, Tristan Tzara’s 1918 *Dada Manifesto* is filled with grand proclamations to embrace contradiction and shun logic in order to destroy bourgeois traditions of art and morality. Tzara’s faith is absolutely in the individual, where the autonomy of the self is valued even amid its own wickedness: “I am against systems, the most acceptable system is on principle to have none. To complete oneself, to perfect oneself in one’s own littleness, to fill the vessel with one’s individuality” (Tzara 287). Scalapino, however, is skeptical throughout her work of the possibility of any sort of self “completion,” and her autobiography is, paradoxically, meant to break up not only Tzara’s “system,” but also his “individuality.” That is, the chaos of the *non sequitur* allows neither system nor individual to be defined in the language of the text, in part

because, Scalapino claims, the self of the author is not written about; it *is* the *writing*, the movement from present to present, a perpetual disjunction. The activity implicit in the gerund “writing” here should recall us to Stein’s reason for valuing verbs over nouns—they are more focused on possibility and activity instead of stasis and definition (*LIA* 214). In such activity, Scalapino’s language foregrounds William James’ transitive function instead of the substantive function. It does not stand still; it moves. This loss of stasis in favor of movement is Scalapino’s disjunction, and in that disjunction, she says, the stability of “knowing what one means” gives way to the back and forth movement of “interrelation.” When this happens, writing becomes “an experiment of reality” (“Radical” 8). I would argue that the interrelation of Scalapino’s *non sequitur* functions similarly to the metonymic relationships that make up Hejinian’s *My Life*, relationships that replace logic as a way to resist familiar narratives or hierarchical arrangements.⁵⁰ It becomes an experiment of reality precisely in that the nature of the relationship is unknown. The word “experiment” here is surely not an accident, and indeed if we look to Hejinian for an explanation of metonymy, we see that through adjacency and interrelation of terms metonymy “conserves [objects’] quiddity, their particular precisions, it is a ‘scientific’ description” (“Strangeness” 151). As I explained in my chapter on *My Life*, metonymy as a structuring principle rejects logic as a way of ordering ideas. Scalapino’s particular metonymy, though, is for her a fundamental break, intensified by the additional disorder that occurs *within* sentences. That is, while with Hejinian’s *My Life* we seemed to move from substantive bit to substantive bit, here we move, often, from one nebulous cloud to another. Thus the entire text functions, for the reader, as a prolonged moment of disjunction, rejecting the ordering principles of, for example, memory, even as memories are presented explicitly in the

⁵⁰ Hejinian’s understanding of metonymy, it should be remembered, functions very similarly to parataxis, which is a juxtaposing or listing of concepts with no discernable ordering system. See pages 95-96 of chapter 2 for a fuller discussion of the comparison.

text. In Scalapino's autobiographical work, then, writing one's life makes plain the fact that one cannot write one's life. Tzara's individuality is impossible.

In understanding this concept, we should look back to a few lines from *Zither* quoted above: "'Life'/as occurrence as silent—or 'not itself' *per se*. // The writing is doing the (exact) same motions 'conceptually'—*so that* one is not in one's life: // *So that* one is not in one's life. So it has an impossible relation to it" (37). Hejinian explains that Scalapino's use of the phrase *per se* is similar in meaning to Kant's thing-in-itself. Here, life is not itself, not a thing-in-itself. We know this in part through the use of the word "as," explained by Hejinian as being a substitute for the copula "is" and Scalapino's method of demonstrating that nothing has inherent existence ("Figuring Out" n. pag.). Perhaps, then, life does not possess silence intrinsically, but rather it exists *as if it were* silence, that is, beyond or before language. Thus, what we write about is not actually any sort of entity we can name as *life*, because as soon as it is named, it is no longer itself. We should be reminded here of Gertrude Stein's claim that she wanted to use "the words that make what I looked at be itself...words that *to me* very exactly related themselves to that thing the thing at which I was looking" (*LIA* 192, emphasis added). Both Stein and Scalapino seem interested in finding ways of navigating this breach between a thing-in-itself and the language used to say that thing, language that always helps create subjective experience while also locating one in a particular cultural context. Hejinian writes further about Scalapino's poetry, "The poetry does not split itself off from that (this) world, and in fact it can't—it's in language, and language is entirely of this world. The only things for which we have words are appearances" ("Figuring Out" n. pag.). That is, Scalapino uses language to express the particular phenomenological experience of making present (through language) that which is always already an "appearance."

Hejinian's analysis of appearances as language, though, doesn't leave us in a wasteland of non-existence. In fact, she reminds us that more happens in language other than the individual moments of substantive signification at the level of the word. She writes, "even while being restricted, bound, to the world of appearances, the poetry can (and does) allude to thought between the words—thought which is still 'in' the poem but not worded... This thought lies between the images—at points of metamorphosis" ("Figuring Out" n. pag.). It is at this point, then, that we must turn from the "life" in Scalapino's autobiographical writing to the "self." We must turn from the bio to the auto and in that turning learn to re-say what can only come "between the images." In the self offered to us by Scalapino, we will find only the perpetual instability of images and gaps and confusions. We will find, it turns out, a comic book.

The Comic Book as the Self

I opened this chapter with a discussion of the way Scalapino plays with the convention of utilizing pictures to supplement text in autobiographies. Her use of the pictures—typical in general but atypical in her particular execution—highlights the role readers play in interpreting image and text as companions in the creation of the self in autobiography.⁵¹ In fact, Scalapino sees vision itself as an intimate part of self-formation. I'm going to delay a fuller discussion of this vision for a bit, turning instead now to Scalapino's interest in the comic book as a stand-in for the self. In examining this particular aspect of her autobiographical project, my analysis will shift from *Zither & Autobiography* to *The Return of Paining*, *The Pearl*, and *Orion: A Trilogy*.

⁵¹ Now, despite the fact that Scalapino claims that the self is the comic book and, further, that the *Trilogy* should be read as if the lines and paragraphs were frames of the comic book, the text only incorporates images into the writing once, other than the cover (which is a photo taken by the author of her husband, Tom White, standing naked in a field). For a fascinating analysis of *Trilogy*'s cover image and how it compares to landscapes by the Hudson River School, whose works Scalapino was interested in while writing the book, see Laura Hinton's article "The Return of Nostalgia: A Fetishistic Spectator in Leslie Scalapino's *The Return of Painting* and the Hudson River School of Art."

Here, instead of blending autobiographical writing with theory, she writes a primarily fictional text interspersed with memories, many of which occur in *Zither*. The narrative “I” in *Trilogy* is never clearly identified, so that readers unaware that some of the events narrated come from Scalapino’s autobiography would have no reason to associate her with them. My study of *Trilogy* will not spend much time with the fictional elements of the book, as I want to focus on the comic-inflected definition of self that she offers, a definition that I argue contributes to the sense of movement and apositionality we see developed in *Zither*. In order to do so, I will provide a brief glimpse of the comic book as used in *Trilogy*, and then shift into a discussion of the genre in general. Then I will return to the *Trilogy*, using the newfound comics theory as a way to analyze the self as comic in Scalapino’s work.

In an interview with Edward Foster, Scalapino defines the self as “the act of seeing....The only thing that the self is then is the seeing of it, and you’re empty because you’re only seeing a thing that’s outside of yourself or the illusion that you are” (Foster 33). She seems to waver here between thinking of the self as a stable entity (“you’re only seeing a thing”) and the self as an act of perception (“the act of seeing...the self is then the seeing of it”). The absence of a predicate nominative at the end of the quoted text maintains the ambivalence, in that one might fill it in in a variety of ways: “you are *a thing*” or perhaps “you are *seeing*.” Even the phrase “you are seeing” is fundamentally ambivalent, signifying the present participle, on the one hand (you see right now in the present), or a gerund functioning as the missing predicate nominative, on the other (you exist as the action of seeing). Scalapino’s trademark grammatical confusion easily allows for the latter, more obscure possibility, but also for the viability of both simultaneously. One does not write about *the self* in Scalapino’s version of autobiography. Rather, one writes about *the process of seeing the self seeing, ad infinitum*. If this phrasing reads

awkwardly, it only indicates how difficult it is in Western philosophy to rid our language, and thus our conscious, intentional activity⁵², of the subject/object distinction. Or, the “I” remains as signifier even as the text problematizes the signified.

It is in this context of the self as its own seeing that we turn to Scalapino’s vision of the comic book, a genre that explicitly welcomes *seeing* into the process of textual creation. She writes in the *Return of Painting* section of the *Trilogy*, “The comic book is the self” (64) and then, in a subsection of *Orion* titled “Essay on the comic book,” “(Each of the lines or paragraphs is one of the frames of a comic book.)” (157). A bit of transitive logic here suggests, then, that these lines of poetry and paragraphs of prose throughout the book are, in fact, a *part of* the seeing, writing self, the self that is in fact the comic book. Scalapino’s self is a blending of what is seen and what is read, a series of tiny present moments, a narrative of potentially endless and contradicting stories; the self is the process of seeing the self reading the self. Because Scalapino has said that the self is “the seeing of it” and now that “the comic book is the self,” I want to examine the ways that the comic book—a material object that is one aspect of the visual/textual genre—can, like the self, resist functioning purely as entity and become activity, and, further, how an understanding of the comic book and its readers can illuminate visions of the self as an active phenomenon of its own seeing.

Though Scalapino’s understanding of the comic book in her own writing tends toward the abstract and theoretical—“the comic book is the self”—she is also quite explicit that we are to read her text as if it *were* a comic book: “(Each of the lines or paragraphs is one of the frames of the comic book.)” Like Lyn Hejinian, she offers us here instructions on how to read the text, a sort of poetics to accompany the poetry itself.⁵³ She explains it to Foster in the following way:

⁵² See page 32 of my introduction for a discussion of how language and intentional activity are connected.

⁵³ See pages 85-88 for my discussion of Hejinian’s “instructions” in *My Life*.

[T]he lines are each paragraphs and sometimes the paragraphs are only one line, are the frames of the comic book and are what are being seen and are being created by the reader in that you are producing actions and motions like running or perceptions. A location is created in which the perceiver is the center. It's the self in that you're inside of that perception, and you're creating it by reading it.

(Foster 32)

The reader, if she follows Scalapino's directions, will produce "actions and motions," so that we get a sense that the creativity of writing and reading is necessarily always in flux. In and of itself, this is hardly revolutionary, but in the final sentence she shifts from the creativity of reading to the self as that which is created "inside of that perception," something that is created "by reading it." That is, in reading a text like the *Trilogy*, in which the paragraphs are separated from each other in the same way the frames of a comic are separated from each other, and in which the reader moves from paragraph to paragraph in the same way she moves from frame to frame, the self *is created*, the comic book *is created*.

Thus far in the scholarship of Scalapino's work, the comic book, while frequently mentioned, has been invoked primarily as a theoretical concept instead of a genre with typical styles, rhetorical moves, and readers, not to mention its own full body of scholarship. The reason for this is unclear. On the one hand, Scalapino's work in general has yet to receive widespread critical attention outside of a small community of scholars particularly interested in Language Poetry and women who fit into that category, so it makes sense that this rather peculiar aspect of her poetics would be slow in reaching the pages of major journals. On the other hand, and perhaps to compound the former, comics themselves are only recently gaining critical acceptance within the academy in general. An examination of the introductions to Neil Gaiman's *Sandman*

(1991-1997) series reveals comic book writers and enthusiasts as downright bitter about the neglect of comics in English departments nationwide.⁵⁴ This is beginning to change, and indeed in 2006 *Modern Fiction Studies* devoted an entire issue to graphic narrative. Not surprisingly, much of the work with comics has come out of the narratology critical community.

Scalapino, though, does not ask how comics go about telling stories, but how comics function as sites of self-creation. Jason Lagapa has done the most work on this particular subject thus far. Lagapa sees a connection between the comic book and Scalapino's devotion to Buddhism, particularly in the comic book's unique use of negative space as a way of ordering its aesthetic. His assessment is based a great deal on Scalapino's contention that "the comic book—is calm" (*Trilogy* 157). In Lagapa's reading, the "calmness" of the comic book comes from its seriality and its repetitive techniques:⁵⁵ frame following frame following frame, each surrounded by a stretch of empty, or negative, space. He sees this serial calmness as analogous to the practice of Zazen, which depends on the repetition of breath and sitting (Lagapa 57). Lagapa's key claim is that "[a]s a result of its framing properties and artificial, boxlike construction, the comic book functions equally to delimit space and represent a circumscribed, if not outright negated, existence. [...] The negative space of the comic book in Scalapino's hands thus

⁵⁴ Frank McConnell, for example, writes that *Sandman* will be declared literature "as soon as the academic critics get off their famously insensitive butts," while Clive Barker suggests that comics' "freedom from critical and academic scrutiny" gives the medium a particular richness.

⁵⁵ The seriality and repetitiveness of comic books, it should be noted, is different from that of film, a medium which influenced, for example, Gertrude Stein's own early interest in repetition as emphasis. Scott McCloud explains that, while both comics and film rely on repetition in order to mean, the reader participates in film seriality in a much more passive way. He calls this seriality "automatic" and suggests that the reader's role in creating continuous motion out of the seriality of films is more a function of vision than interpretation (65). Henry John Pratt supports this contention, writing that "The pace of reading a comic is literary, constructed by the reader. Because of the literary dimension, the reader's eyes and mind play over the succession of panels at the reader's own speed, rather than at film's relentless twenty-four frames per second" (110). Even Stein's understanding of seriality depended on the active participation of the readers as evidenced by her fascination in *Geographical History of America* with examining words one at a time by moving her glasses across the page, instead of looking at the entire page when the glasses sit on her nose (*GHA* 151). Film, it should be noted, contains no "gutter" between the frames. Or, at least, none that is perceptible to the human eye.

becomes an important way of negating subjectivity, for she recurrently represents the self as empty” (44-45). Though Lagapa provides an exciting link between the unsigned space of comics and the negative calmness of Buddhist thought, he gives very little attention to comic books as a genre, as an aesthetic form with conventions and techniques and an incredibly large number of readers. His bibliography includes not a single work of comic book theory or criticism, so that both he and his readers need know nothing of comics other than that they are pages of pictures and speech bubbles broken up into individual frames, just like poems are “nothing more than” groups of words broken up into stanzas. In fact, by neglecting the critical work on the so-called “negative space” of comics, he misconstrues the gutter in comics as completely *empty*, when in fact it is a space enlivened by vibrant, creative acts. His linking of this “negative” space to a sense of “no-self” should thus be called into question.

Megan Simpson’s method of dealing with the function of comics in Scalapino’s work is similar to Lagapa’s in its abstracting of the genre, though she deals with the presence inside the frames instead of the absence of the gutters. She writes, “What is actually there for Scalapino is one’s experience of the world, structured in language, and for a subject-in-process, constantly in flux: as a poem moves from frame to frame, what is fixed as the ‘reality’ in one frame gives way to that of the next, and so on” (Simpson 203). Laura Hinton offers a perhaps more pragmatic analysis of comics in Scalapino’s work than Simpson and Lagapa, examining them as Scalapino’s way of disrupting time: “She rejects a perception of motion based on linear or chronological time; rather, she creates an image of back-and-forth motion, conveying a sense of simultaneity, just as narrative frames are viewed simultaneously, before and after, in the comic-book form” (“Formalism” 135). Again, though, neither Simpson nor Hinton gives much attention to the work scholars have done examining the way frames function in comics and the way

readers deal with the blending of visual and textual elements. In particular, I want to examine the work scholars of comics have done in theorizing the role readers play in creating the comic text. Doing so will help us better articulate the ways in which the comic book as self creates a phenomenal self that is its own seeing. That is, Simpson's "subject in process" and Hinton's "back-and-forth motion" need to be reconfigured as belonging to the reader as much as the author.

Because Scalapino thinks of the self as an active, phenomenal process—seeing the self seeing—we need to think about the comics as their own sort of phenomenal activity and the comic book as the site of that activity, the site in which the reader creates the comic/self amid the rather complex tasks associated with each read: reading the speech bubbles and other writing, linking the writing to the image, identifying the "correct" order in which to read the frames, and navigating the gap of blank space between frames. This last task is where the scholarly work of comics theorists can help us best illuminate Scalapino's interest in the genre, for it is in that "bridging of the gap" that readers most explicitly participate in the creation of meaning in the comics. Much of the critical discussion about the creative role the reader plays in comics is an extension of and response to Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics* (1993), a work that blends comics with theory quite literally in that the theory is written *as* a comic. In it, McCloud develops a concept he calls "closure" to explain the process by which a reader fills in the gaps, so to speak, in the gutter between the frames. He defines closure as the "phenomenon of observing the parts but perceiving the whole" (63), a definition similar to William James' definition of horizons of meaning, which I discussed in detail in my introduction.⁵⁶ McCloud argues that closure occurs in many different daily activities (such as seeing a person with sunglasses and knowing that they have eyes underneath them, p. 63) and media, such as film and

⁵⁶ See pages 27-28.

television (65). In order to enact this closure, we rely on “past experience,” synthesizing new meanings and new images from what we’ve seen before. For McCloud, comics “uses closure like *no other*...[it is] a medium where the audience is a willing and conscious collaborator and closure is the agent of change, time and motion” (65). We can see here one of the reasons the comic book is an exciting way of reconceptualizing the self, especially in light of the intersubjective thesis I’ve been arguing throughout. Readers of comics, in McCloud’s understanding, enact this closure in order to create activity on the page. Action—change, time, and motion—cannot happen here without the reader “closing” disparate and incomplete elements. But the most exciting and relevant aspect of this closure for McCloud is the closure that comes between the frames in what he calls the “gutter.” In the gutter—or the “negative space” of Lagapa’s work—“human imagination takes two separate images and transforms them into a single idea” (66). That is, the “negativity” that Lagapa saw as creating an absence of subjectivity is, in McCloud’s assessment, actually the place at which subjectivity is most clearly asserted, for this gutter is not empty, but rather filled with something that “experience tells you...must be there” (67). The visual example McCloud provides of this “filled gutter” is of two panels of a woman calling out “Peek-A-Boo!”, each with her face clearly visible. In the “gutter” between these two panels, he draws an image of the woman holding a blanket up in front of her face. That is, though we would normally not be able to see the covered face in the emptiness of the gutter, we fill that space by imagining, or creating, the image ourselves.

McCloud’s closure depends on the understanding that the border of each panel cuts each small image off from the other images on the page. These panels thus create discrete narrative moments that are disconnected from each other: “Comic panels fracture both time and space, offering a jagged, staccato rhythm of unconnected moments” (67). Another way of thinking

about the panels is that they are quite visibly moments of a sort of pure present—Scalapino’s disjunction—each existing within its own time-space continuum. For Scalapino, the prose in *Zither & Autobiography* functions similarly: “The prose narrative is, in its splices of characters in actions, the comic strip” (*Zither* 51). Indeed, both *Zither* and the *Trilogy* utilize this splicing technique to give us repeated moments of the present, so that the disorder of memory, and the arbitrary ordering systems of fiction, are made manifest:

In the mountains, in Japan, riding the bicycles through the pouring rain, lightning flashing around—ahead, the rear tire of the bicycle swayed with my younger sister seated on it wailing; screaming on the tail of the bicycle, another lightning flash coming down.

My older sister and I pedaling fast calling back and forth to each other skidding in lighting.

Hopping in potato or rice bags tied at our waist at night racing on a field with others—the fireflies and explosions of fireworks opening in the blackness.

Living with a Japanese family in Tokyo and in the mountains with them in summer. A bucket in the kitchen with eels. (*Zither* 16-17)

He seems helpless. He’d been a marine.

The girl had been left. He’s complaining and yet holding back.

She recognizes it as a feeler.

The dart a ball, hitting her in the gut—floats backwards out in the air shot and crumpled at the foot of the stairs.

the curled ball, having whirled, diving for her—punching her in the gut. His back hurls forward.

The dark curved steep moving stairs—a hump, goes down slowly like a falls. to meet him.

She lies in her apartment. (*Trilogy* 165, sic capitalization)

The use of the present tense—or no verb at all—in most of these lines helps turn each into its own present moment, the present tense verb helping to build a frame around the action, revealing the comic book mode. Each becomes connected to each via “interrelation” or “adjacency” instead of logic. In this way, the linked present moments recall the non-hierarchical, paratactic construction of Hejinian’s *My Life*. The particular purpose of each pairing must be constructed by the reader. However, as I argued in chapter 2, readers do not “close down” what happens between the sentences, but rather open the text up into endless possibilities. McCloud’s definition of closure begins to look a bit shaky. He writes further that “closure allows us to connect these moments and mentally construct a continuous, unified reality” (67). His language to describe our construction of this supposedly unified reality takes on rather dictatorial tones when describing different types of relationships between images. The *non sequitur* category—one of six modes of transition he describes⁵⁷—presents unrelated images in adjacent panels, so that the “reality” constructed by the reader is no doubt unpredictable. McCloud insists, though, that these individual panels, because of their adjacency, must be brought together into a “single organism.” He writes, “By creating a sequence with two or more images, we [comic book writers] are endowing them with a single, overriding identity and forcing the viewer to consider them as a whole” (73). McCloud’s *non sequitur* is much more seditious than the one offered by

⁵⁷ The others are moment-to-moment, action-to-action, subject-to-subject, scene-to-scene, and aspect-to-aspect (McCloud 70-72).

Scalapino, which I discussed earlier in this chapter. Scalapino sees the *non sequitur* as the way in which randomness and the disjunction of the present moment are welcomed into the text.

McCloud sees it as something of a coercion. The effect of this coercion is a conflict within McCloud's theory between the intimacy of author and reader he initially espouses (69) and the coercion he later articulates (73).

Though McCloud's theory of closure ultimately favors the stasis of a "single organism," his extensive discussion of what occurs between the reader and the author in the gutter of the comic book is important, as it reveals that there is a great deal of space for the reader to become a part of the process of self-creation-as-comic-creation in a text like Scalapino's. That is, by insisting that each line or paragraph of *Trilogy* is the frame of a comic book, she opens up the gaps (whether on the page or in the narrative) as spaces for the reader to occupy. My use of the word *space* here is deliberate, as the gutter of a comic book is in every sense a space on the page, and if we are to think of Scalapino's paragraphs as frames, then we must think of the gaps between those paragraphs spatially as well. Scalapino continues the idea of the present as a fundamentally spatial concept in *Zither* when she writes, "As writing, the gesture in this is spatially a line in the foreground—'foreground' is one's 'mind,' one's attention as (the) present. One brings 'events' 'shreds' onto this line so that 'being in life' is either past or present or at any time" (*Zither* 52). To be focused on the present—writing, self—is, it seems, to step out of the "time line" and into a sort of geographical space, so that one is in the "foreground." If this foreground is something like the gutter in comics—that is, a space that is separate from the "timeline" of events in the panels—then we need to do some more work to figure out what is happening there. Anne Magnussen's description of the materiality of comics supports my contention that they offer a non-hierarchical, time-free "space" for creation of the self as activity.

She argues that readers of comics can take in individual pages as a whole space—or, we might say, moment of presence—before following the order of the individual panels (200). The geographical space of presence, then, calls for an openness in reading processes and thus, an openness in interpretations of the self.

Ole Frahm offers an alternative to the “single organism” and “unified reality” of McCloud’s closure, proposing that comics help readers to “appreciate the heterogeneous signs of script and image in their peculiar, material quality which cannot be made into a unity” (177). Comics, then, allow for a particularly heterogeneous reading in part because they combine so many types of signs: words, images, onomatopoetic words, and, yes, blank spaces. Frahm’s theory is that this heterogeneity produces a self-referentiality in comics, in that because there are so many different types of signs, and because the role the reader plays in creating the signified of those signs is so foregrounded, the unified reality that McCloud argued for is actually decommissioned into the irreality of the comic itself: “In their heterogeneous materiality the signs in constellation are already self-referential. We may even say that the signs, because of their being self-referential, imitate each other in their claim to signify a thing beyond the signs” (180). Scalapino’s texts do the same thing, in part through her Steinian rejection of antecedents in favor of the endless pointing of pronouns. The “she” in the *Trilogy* points only to earlier incarnations of that “she,” and thus, ultimately to “her” first appearance in the text: “The young person living there, having an intense tortured, as if tearing in half pain in the middle, waking lying asleep, though this had only occurred this one time” (5). Like Scalapino’s autobiography in *Zither*, then, the text opens with the near annihilation of the protagonist. All the “she’s” of the novel point only to each other and eventually to this “young person.” The lack of stable

signification creates in the text the heterogeneity of the comic book, resisting the unified reality of closure.

The difference between McCloud's theory of closure and Frahm's theory of heterogeneity in comics helps to articulate the problems inherent in the construction of not only the writing self in comics, but the reading self as well. A closure-based reading would maintain the kind of strict positionality that assigns each reader and writer a distinct perspective inextricably bound to his or her historical, cultural subject position. This is because even if the self is created in the text, the unified nature of the text would presume a sort of mutually encountered wholeness. Closure would, quite literally, close the one off from the other, preventing the intersubjective encounters I have been arguing for in these texts. It is tempting, of course, to think of the self as a "whole" that is created out of the disparate elements of the comic. However, Frahm argues that when we read comics we are actually encountering repeated moments of presence, similar to Scalapino's disjunction, and that what the reader produces out of those moments is not a single *anything*, but rather an extended multitude: Referring to daily strips in newspapers, Frahm writes:

A comic-strip character's identity exists only in its material repetition. This material identity is inevitably disrupted. Although the character is called by the same name, it is, owing to material repetition in space, from panel to panel and from drawing to drawing, as well as in time, from day to day, not the same but *another alike*. Being another, the character has to be repeated to preserve its continuity. (183, my emphasis)

Frahm's rejection of "the same" in favor of "another like" highlights the truly creative work that goes into constituting these characters on the reader side of the text. If a character remains "the

same,” then readers need only passively receive and identify the character. However, if the character across multiple panels and multiple issues is always only “alike” previous iterations, then readers must decide over again that this image *here* is an iteration of that image *there*, reminding readers of this project of Gertrude Stein’s line from *Stanzas in Meditation*, “There which is not only here but here as well as there” (II.xvi). Instead of the Husserlian appresentation that allows perceiving subjects to perceive other subjects, thus conflating “here” and “there,” we get characters whose identities are created through a repetition of “here” in the “there” of later panels and issues.⁵⁸ There is no “core” that exists across multiple iterations that is not constituted in the reading (and seeing) mind of the reader. In such a way, Scalapino’s text does tend to function like a comic book, multiple iterations of the “I” and the “she” resisting the stasis of core identity and instead relying on the active participation of a reading mind to create them into “another alike.” When the autobiographical “I” shows up in the *Trilogy*, this process is radicalized in that it cannot be identified as being autobiographical at all *unless the reader has already read Zither*. That is, there is nothing in the *Trilogy* that suggests Lejeune’s autobiographical pact is in play. Instead, the “I” signifies “Leslie Scalapino” in the text only if the reader constitutes it as such, without the benefit of any sort of pact. The “I” of the *Trilogy* depends entirely on the reader for its identity as “another alike.”

Before returning to my analysis of the *Trilogy*, I want to demonstrate how I see this likeness functioning in comics through an examination of two images of the same character—Delirium—from the *Sandman* series by Neil Gaiman. The Gaiman example is useful in part because it shows how the image of a character can work against an apparently stable, linear manifestation of the character in language, much like the pictures of Scalapino and her family in *Zither* gradually did away with the author as the language of the text gradually revealed her. That

⁵⁸ See pages 54-55 of chapter 1 for a fuller discussion of appresentation.

is, the images help us to see how fragile the “core” of a character is in the comics medium.

Delirium, the youngest of a set of seven siblings called The Endless who embody forces governing the universe⁵⁹, is a crazed, elusive character who finds it painfully difficult to remain attached to reality. She gives off a vibe of one perpetually on a drug trip, emphasized by her speech bubbles, which are colored in a tie-dye form, use wavy edges instead of the clean-cut ones of most of the other characters, and employ lettering that flows up and down instead of keeping to normal straight lines. Throughout the ten-volume series, Delirium’s speech bubbles and manner of speaking remain consistent. That is, her *language* character is stable throughout (though stable does not mean static; she does learn and grow as a character). However, the *image* we are presented of Delirium does in fact change—a great deal. The most obvious and practical reason for this is that the artist changed: Mike Dringenberg drew the Delirium from volume 4, and Michael Zulli drew the Delirium from volume 10. What readers get, however, is a character who fundamentally changes, regardless of who the artist is. Delirium from volume 10 is not the *same* character as Delirium from volume 4. Rather, she is *another* Delirium *alike* the first. Both versions look disheveled in their torn clothing and unkempt hair. Both are presented as guarded and somewhat childlike. All of this manifests itself very differently, though. Dringenberg’s Delirium is boyish, with short cropped hair and muscular legs spread apart. She is also more sexualized, wearing a leotard and torn fishnet stockings. Zulli’s Delirium looks quite different. She is wrapped up in an oversized coat, as if warding off the cold. She keeps her hand tight on the collar in a self-protective way, increasing her vulnerability and fear of the outside world. Half of her head is shaved and the other half is covered in wavy, tangled hair that bursts from her head as if on fire. Zulli has given her dark circles under her eyes which, when played against the

⁵⁹ Delirium’s siblings are Dream (the Sandman of the title), Death, Destruction, Destiny, Desire, and Despair.

extreme paleness of her complexion, gives her an orphaned, desperate look, much more childlike and innocent than the sexualized, resistant Delirium created by Dringenberg.

The interesting thing about this comparison of the two incarnations of Delirium is the way that they both embody and disrupt the repetition-centered identity articulated by Frahm above. Frahm argues that continuity was preserved only in repetition, but here we see that not all aspects of a character need be repeated. The name is repeated. The disordered speech bubbles are repeated. But the *image* is not. In this way, I would argue that the core identity of “Delirium”—or, we might say, the signified to the signifier of the text—does not “exist” in the same way that a character’s identity exists in comics when an image’s integrity is maintained across space (from one panel to another) and time (across multiple issues). To what, or to whom, does the fusion of word and image point in these two panels? The disruption of the link between the image and the text highlights for us the way that characters are constituted phenomenally by a reading mind in interaction with the writing mind through the mediation of the text. In this regard, we may not dismiss as simply a fluke of *Sandman*’s publication history the fact that Gaiman used different artists across the seven-year run of his series. Rather, Dringenberg and Zulli become readers of the text just as much as the person who buys the books from her local comic book store. They demonstrate quite literally the creative role readers play in working with the material offered by the writer.

I would argue that Scalapino performs the same sort of “another alike” method in her own autobiographical writings. In traditional autobiography (or, that which upholds Lejeune’s autobiographical pact), the author might strive to maintain a consistent sense of the “I” throughout the text, even as the “I” develops and changes over the course of the time period contained within the narrative. It is through this consistent “I” that the autobiographical pact is

written and endorsed. Scalapino's autobiographical and quasi-autobiographical writing, however, disrupts this continuity so that the "I" is not the *same* across narrative time, but is instead *another* *alike*. In *Zither*, this occurs in a few ways, such as the rejection of any sort of linear narration or the blend of narratives of experience with theoretical writing. In the *Trilogy*, in which lines and paragraphs are meant to function as comic book frames (157), both the "I" and the "she" who make their way throughout the text are nearly always only *alike* previous occurrences of those pronouns, any indications of *sameness* being few and far between, in part because "I" and "she" lack stable antecedents and thus are always engaged in a process of signification without end. In fact, the juxtaposition of the "main character" of the fictional parts of the *Trilogy*—the repeated and unnamed "she"—with the autobiographical "I" indicates precisely how similar the work is that we perform to constitute these two. In addition, the reliance on pronouns instead of nouns allows readers the chance to create their own antecedents throughout, similar to what readers of Stein's *Stanzas* are asked to do.

Space prohibits me from spending much time with the fictional parts of the *Trilogy*. What I find the most interesting for this particular project, however, is the way that the fictional flows seamlessly into the autobiographical. The first two sections of the *Trilogy*, *The Return of Paining* and *The Pearl*, are devoted primarily to a narration of the unnamed woman, a sort of perpetual free-lancer who seems to fall accidentally into detective work. In *Orion*, however, the "I" becomes much more prevalent, as do references to the comic book, including the declaration that "(Each of these lines or paragraphs is one of the frames of the comic book)" (157), indicating that, at the very least, *Orion* should be read as if it were composed of comic book frames. In order to demonstrate my thesis that the comic book as self reconfigures apositionality as activity

instead of stasis, I will examine an anecdote that occurs in both the *Trilogy* and *Zither* and then consider the results of that analysis in light of the comic theory discussed above.

A few pages into the *Orion* section of the *Trilogy*, a first-person voice begins narrating an apparently traumatic childhood even. Readers who have only access to the *Trilogy* are given no narrative clues that indicate the “I” of these sentences (and of the many sentences surrounding them that also use the “I”) signify “Leslie Scalapino” instead of simply a shift into a first person narrative voice. No autobiographical pact has been established, and therefore the “I” here is analogous (though not identical) to the “I” of Stein’s *Stanzas*, in that there is no precise antecedent to stand behind it. The voice explains, “I woke up tying my shoe fully dressed, which I’d done myself, crying. From this, I perceived there was no one there” (160). By itself, this anecdote is unremarkable. A child wakes up suddenly, is confused by what is happening, and begins crying. The sudden disjunction between sleeping and waking seems to have jumbled the distinction between presence and absence: her shoe was tied, but no one was there to tie it, except for herself. Initially, the phrase “there was no one there” seems to indicate the absence of an adult who usually helps her tie her shoes. The crying in this reading is perfectly understandable, particularly for a child just waking up. It also, however, suggests that the remembered child here is uncomfortable with the idea of herself being placed in a definite subject position. How, she seems to ask through her tears, can I be the one who has tied this shoe?

In *Zither*, the same anecdote is narrated, though in a way that significantly changes the reading just proposed: “I woke having dressed myself and tying my shoe crying. My older sister looking at me. // I woke having fully dressed myself—I thought why am I crying? and stopped crying. The impression I got is that we are not ‘oneself’ that isn’t there. As if an instrument

playing two or several notes at the same time” (14, sic capitalization). From its full title, *Zither & Autobiography* establishes at least a loose autobiographical pact with the reader. Even if the narrative is non-linear, discontinuous, and interspersed with theoretical musings, the “I” still points back to “Leslie Scalapino.” Here, a similar absence of self accompanies her being wrenched out of sleep and finding herself in a confusing situation, that of already having gotten dressed and tied her shoes. (The fuller story is that her mother woke Leslie and her sisters up to go pick their father up from the airport in the middle of the night.)

Zither’s “we are not ‘oneself’ that isn’t there” performs a different task from the *Trilogy*’s “there was no one there.” The latter is outward-directed, seeming (at first) to refer to the absence of some other, an absence which seems to contribute to the crying. The continuance of the crying in the *Trilogy* version maintains the presence of an acting subject—the one who cries. This stabilized subject position persists because there is no one else there to disrupt it. The *Zither* statement, though, introduces another subject, her sister, whose gaze forces her to acknowledge her action—crying—and to stop it. The result of this cessation is a gradual diminishing and then *loss* of self. In the transition from “we” to “oneself” to “isn’t there,” the scope of identification narrows further and further, so that the plenitude of multiple self-identifying pronouns gives way to an isolated “oneself” and an eventual loss of all presence. This loss of the plenitude of existence and self-identity seems to be a way of coping with a sort of subject/object binary that troubles her when she wakes up crying. She is quite self-reflexive here, performing an action (self as subject), then, through the appropriation of her sister’s gaze, perceiving herself performing an action (self as object) and then making the choice to cease that action (a return to subject).

The curious metaphor that concludes the *Zither* account reinforces the ways in which Scalapino conceives of the self as activity (not as entity): “As if an instrument playing two or several notes at the same time.” The ambiguity of the grammatical structure here prompts us to link the sentence either to the material that comes before—*we are not ‘oneself’ that isn’t there, as if we were an instrument playing*—or to conclude that it is unfinished, that *something else* is like an instrument playing. Scalapino has a habit of using the word “as” in disruptive ways, most clearly in the title of her long poem *As: All Occurrence in Structure, Unseen—(Deer Night)*. Lyn Hejinian, as I noted above, sees Scalapino’s use of the word “as” as a revision of the copula. Hejinian writes that “as” is “a site of relationship—it is neither one thing nor another but, in Scalapino’s sense, it is ‘occurrence in structure, unseen.’ It is prevalent in metaphors, and by virtue of its presence it produces metamorphoses” (“Figuring Out” n. pag.). In fact, the concluding “as if an instrument” functions as a site of metamorphosis in this memorial anecdote, substituting something tangible and material—notes on an instrument—into the well of absence just created by the denial of self. And it should be noted that the *player* is nowhere to be found. The instrument—an object to be manipulated by an acting subject—is freed from that subject, though it in no way plays “on its own.” It is, simply, playing. The instrument *is* the playing, just as the self *is* experiencing. There is no subject to intend (*noesis*) the instrument as object (*noema*) in the world. By transitioning us from the plentiful identity of “we” to the “playing” of an unmanned instrument, then, Scalapino depicts a self that resists the copula of existence and instead acts, perceives, and sees amid its own absence.

Seriality as the Active, Comic Self

So far, I have argued that the comic book for Scalapino helps her to create a self that *is* activity—it is writing, it is seeing, it is perceiving. In addition, because the comic book as a genre relies on the reader's participation in the heterogeneous possibilities of silence and repetition, any self that is created within the text becomes a sort of opening, a spatial field of disjunction and presence in which readers participate as self-creators. To conclude this study of the self in Scalapino's autobiographical writing, I want to examine Scalapino's broader phenomenological project, showing how the comic book, in being equivalent to the self, is also phenomena, perception.

Part of Scalapino's project is, at every turn, to use her writing to reveal the structures behind thought and social order. When successful, such a project results in a simultaneous inward (reflection) and outward (expression) turning, so that the reader and/or writer is left in a perpetual loop of refusal. She writes, "I was interested in a syntax whose very mode of observation was to reveal its structure; that is, its subject and its mode are subjectivity being observation. Since it is itself subjective the viewpoint is 'without basis.' It removes its own basis, that of exterior authority, as a critique of itself" ("The Cannon" 26). A page later, she calls this mode "*Language as interior and entirely from the outside at once*" (27, emphasis in original). The play of inside and outside here indicate the difficulty of developing a subjectivity capable of taking subjectivity as its subject: "its subject and its mode are subjectivity being observation." Laura Hinton's gendered reading of Scalapino's work suggests that Scalapino tends to diminish the distinction between the interior life and the exterior world as a way to develop an apositional subject. Hinton writes that "Scalapino's 'separation' between self and 'other' absorbs any distinction between the two. It therefore modifies separational categories like 'inside and outside...perceiver and perceived'" ("Formalism" 134). Scalapino sees her work as in part

dealing with the (false) dichotomy of self and other or self and culture. She writes in *Zither*, “Extended texts which can articulate one’s early interior as *being* the ‘outside’ culture in conflict, and being at the same time separate from its social formation, are an investigation of the action of one’s ‘mind,’ which itself is apprehension only as that phenomena (action of seeing) there” (53, emphasis in original). Here, “one’s early interior” *is* the same as the outside culture. One is not shaped by the other, because one *is* the other. Simultaneously, though, there exists an “interior” that exists apart from “its social formation.” Scalapino’s writing tends to allow mutually exclusive concepts (one is and is not distinguishable from one’s social formation) to function on equal footing. She does this in part by simply piling these concepts on top of each other syntactically, but also by redefining nouns as actions, so that they break loose of the Steinian rigidity of nouns and open up into an equally Steinian possibility of verbs.

What radicalizes this process for Scalapino, then, is her insistence, throughout much of her writing, that *phenomena* are the action of seeing, instead of specific formulations of things perceived. She explains this concept further in her essay “The Recovery of the Public World.” Here, she writes:

A phenomenon hasn’t inherent existence—as it is not based on a single moment of the mind, nor on successive moments of a mind, as such moments arise dependently (don’t exist inherently, not being that phenomenon itself—though appearing to be). In other words, the apprehension or the ‘moment’ of the mind appears to be the phenomenon itself, which the mind itself is seeing. Neither exists inherently. (53)

Through the process of self-consciousness, then, we see ourselves seeing, and it is in that seeing that we see phenomena, so that the perceived phenomenon actually *is* the process by which we

see it, or, more precisely, the process by which the *mind* sees it. One of the reasons Scalapino conceives of phenomena themselves as action (and thus constantly in flux) is that she refuses to allow phenomena to exist in isolation. She writes, “as no phenomena or events/constructs can be single, in that they spring from other contingencies and *are* these, they do not exist in that perceived form (single)—only appear to exist ‘at present,’ which also only *appears* to exist” (“Recovery” 54, emphasis in original). It is a mistake, according to Scalapino, or perhaps a delusion, to constitute a perceived object in consciousness as simply the object itself. Each object/phenomenon is contingent on other objects/phenomena and is simultaneously the thing upon which other phenomena are contingent. A truly phenomenological engagement with the world, then, is not an engagement with individual, isolated moments of stasis, but rather with the frothing contexts that connect those moments to each other. It is primarily in this refusal of stasis and isolation that I see Scalapino’s phenomenology and autobiographical poetry connecting most beautifully with the works I’ve been examining by Gertrude Stein and Lyn Hejinian. All three authors have, to varying degrees and with differing results, created new definitions of self and reconfigured new relationships with readers by refusing the “inherent existence” of phenomena, instead allowing these “contingent” relationships to leap front and center.

In order to deconstruct the stasis of phenomena in isolation, Scalapino claims, in the quotation above, that these phenomena “only appear to exist ‘at present,’ which also only appears to exist” (“Recovery” 54). That is, when phenomena are perceived, their (false) isolation and stasis are developed in part through the perceiver’s construction of an isolated and static “present moment” in which the perceiver (I) perceives the object as phenomena. That is, the very *idea* of there being a “present” that exists in distinction from “past” and “future” is simply a way for the mind to constitute the perceptive process. In reality (whatever “reality” means at this

point), the “present moment” has no more inherent existence than does a tree, a cup, a chair. All, Scalapino claims, are mere appearances. In her phenomenology, heavily influenced by the Buddhism of Nāgārjuna, these appearances are maintained and given the solidity of inherent existence by “logic” (“Recovery” 54). But logic and rationality, for Scalapino, are false ordering systems that foretell their own end:

The implication of Nāgārjuna’s ‘logic’ is the deconstruction of all logic or rationality, which (logic), as such, is not either observation *per se* or phenomena (analysis, such as that fire arises from kindling, is generalization, self-defining in laying a basis as being its own conclusion). The fire doesn’t arise from kindling; fire isn’t the same thing as kindling; kindling doesn’t exist as fire. (“Recovery” 54).

Here she deconstructs the “logic” of cause and effect, a system that breaks down, it seems, when none of the units of the logical system maintain the inherent existence that would allow them to affect each other in such a clear-cut way. If neither kindling nor fire exists in isolation, then kindling cannot become fire; fire does not come out of kindling. The connection between kindling and fire, then, simply *appears* as such to us, the perceivers. This focus on appearances is in part why Scalapino, here and in her more strictly poetic works, deconstructs so mightily the role of the observer (the watcher, the seer). Without an inherently existing observer able to observe inherently existing objects, rationality, or the logic of cause and effect, no longer works. This is because the observer, just as contingent on other phenomena as the perceived object, can no longer be so strictly separated from those very phenomena: “by undercutting the observer, one has a perspective of place that is both ‘spatially’ ‘interior’ and ‘outside’—a relativity” (“Recovery” 55).

The deconstruction of the “observer” as clearly delineated from the observed world works to also deconstruct the supposed order that governs the social world. Scalapino sees social power as being concentrated in the hand of those who, first, insist that the universe is orderly and unified, and second, impose that order on the less powerful. She writes in the *Trilogy*: “Those who are without social power are less inclined to see reality as orderly // not from their view // less inclined to see the social constructions as unified // is the reverse” (153). The kind of “order” Scalapino is thinking about here seems to be a sort of historical, cause and effect order, in which actors and actions, subjects and objects, winners and losers are all clearly delineated, easily defined and separated, and thus easily placed in a *series*. The danger embedded in this series-based vision of reality is that it can become a false overlay, masking any sense of “what really happened,” or, perhaps, simply rejecting all phenomenal experiences that don’t align with the correct series designated by the powerful civilization. Thus, the series developed by the powerful risks becoming a delusion: “We’ve attacked and apparently routed the government of a country and are saying it is freedom for them. perverting it—and the newsmen are—creating a series of delusions” (*Trilogy* 177, sic capitalization). I would argue that the kind of series we are getting here is not the same sort of series that we get in comic books, whether of panel following panel or issue following issue. Those series demand active reader participation in the creation of the story. As Scott McCloud argues, when an ax kills a person *between* the frames, “[The author is] not the one who let it drop or decided how hard the blow, or who screamed, or why...all of you participated in the murder. All of you held the axe and chose your spot. To kill a man between panels is to condemn him to a thousand deaths” (68-69). That is, though comic panels are placed in a basic left-to-right, top-to-bottom series (or right-to-left in Japanese comics), the precise relations of cause and effect, progression, hierarchy, and so on—in short, the relations that form

whatever “whole” each reader wants—are fundamentally *disordered*. And in that disorder, Scalapino will suggest, delusion is dismissed in favor of a liberating invalidation.

We see the beginning of that invalidation in the following, from the *Trilogy*:

the civilization with order having created the clear series of events.

to be a comic book form. It invalidates itself.

It will use itself up as pulp and be regarded as nothing. It is not ‘discursive,’ ‘analytical’ ‘method’—by in some ways reproducing such as not being that.

If the series is inhibited, cauterized early-on no relations occur between people.

one can’t expect to be a bum—according to them.

it’s invisible to them who don’t see it

because they interpret experiences in reverse

as not valued—nor non-existent

then depart from them (169-70)

Here, Scalapino is searching for a way out of the delusion of clear order imposed by those in power, and she finds it in comics, which reject it on multiple levels. On the one hand, as I’ve been discussing throughout this chapter, they rely on a more democratized creation of meaning within the text, one that denies the limitations of stasis and instead welcomes the unpredictability of limitless creative activities, all taking place between the panels. On the other hand, we also see Scalapino’s acknowledgement that comics are not taken seriously as *cultural* texts. They are pulp, they are nothing; they are not discursive or analytic; they are invisible. As such, they becomes representative of the ways in which one can get out of the delusional order created by

the powerful, those who “interpret experiences in reverse” and expect everyone else to do the same. If one *becomes* the comic, one is always already pulp, and thus can escape delusion. Scalapino calls this a process of invalidation, and it is significant here that she uses a word typically signifying the negation of truthfulness as the only way to escape the stultifying powers of hierarchy and order.

In such a way, Scalapino participates in a revolt not only against those who would define her self for her, but against those who would define her texts and place them (or not) in literary traditions and movements. Deborah M. Mix, writing of the anti-tradition of women-authored avant-garde texts, writes that “Self-theorization, which works as a collaborative negotiation between author and readers, is essential to how these texts function. To allow someone else to define what these texts are or what they should do as experimental writing or as politically engaged texts and so on only serves to reinscribe the dynamic (or lack thereof) between the central and the marginalized; someone already occupying the center is given (or assumes) the power to determine what is sufficiently ‘different,’ sufficiently confrontational” (Mix 10). Mix, like Megan Simpson, is particularly interested in the way avant-garde texts by women can be read as a revolt against not only the strains of literature that run near the center, but also against those already avant-garde strains that run along the edges of what counts as literary. And Scalapino can certainly and valuably be read through such a critical lens. However, by configuring her own texts as comic books, Scalapino in some ways actually dismisses the avant-garde and any “pretentiousness” that might, however mistakenly, be associated with it, and jumps ship to the pulp of comics. There she finds a genre whose relationship with its readers is not simply the stuff of genre theory, but rather an explicit aspect of its creative work, from the reliance on readerly imagination between the frames to move the story forward, to the

publication of reader letters in individual issues, to the practice of cosplay (dressing up as comic book characters—or really, any favorite character). The invalidation of the self in comics, then, pulls down the monument to the self in favor of gallery of relationships.

In addition, this invalidation reaches toward a concept I developed in my chapter on Hejinian's *My Life*, in which I argued that the poem performs an eidetic reduction as a way of exploring all *possible* lives instead of simply expressing one *actual* life. Here, invalidation rejects the sort of definition and logic of the powerful civilization. By negating the idea of an actual existence, we achieve instead all *possible* existences. Individual existence, or rather, the existence of an individual, is a finite concept. It seems to require a beginning and an ending, an *is* and an *is not*. Non-existence, however, is a gloriously uninhibited concept. Within non-existence, there is always the *possibility* of existence, *any* existence. In acknowledging the non-existence of the writing and thus of the self, Scalapino uses the presence of the text to signify the absence of the static self. In the midst of an at-times heated exchange with Ron Silliman published in *Poetics Journal* in 1991, she writes, "My premise, in general and in writing, is that I do not think there is a man, or woman, or society, or social construction; though it is there. It is not there" (Silliman & Scalapino 53). Man, woman, society, social construction—all are invalidated by revising the logical axiom that $x \neq \text{not-}x$. What if it can?, she asks. What if the instrument plays itself?

Conclusion: The Revolutionary Comic

Alicia Cohen argues that Scalapino's deconstruction of the observer as self is actually part of the process of deconstructing reality as having any sort of inherent existence. In Cohen's assessment, this process is intimately tied to the creative acts that go into reading: "Her work

brings to the surface of reading the role we ourselves play in making the ‘real’ we see. [...] Her work seeks first and foremost to reveal the sleight of hand repressed in conventional or natural pictures of the real. In such picture[s], what is fictional is figured as the opposite of what is real, or at least is a fabrication of that real. For Scalapino, however, to think about anything at all is to fictionalize” (n. pag.). If there is no difference between the interior of the observer and the exterior of the observed, then there can be no external “reality” that is separate from us, that we perceive from a Husserlian transcendence and report on or read about in language. Further, writes Cohen, “[Scalapino’s] work takes place before the act of representation and is radically skeptical of a world that appears self-evident to the human eye. For Scalapino, the relationship of writing and representation to the world of which we are a part is complex. The world that appears to our sight as un-written is, like literature, an elaborate artistic construct. To see accurately, we must begin to see vision itself as a visionary process” (n. pag.). Everything that we see, then, is always already seen, constructed, fictionalized. Scalapino’s goal in her writing is to see the seeing, to expose the observer as an appearance to her own consciousness. In this regard, then, Scalapino’s work becomes a radical sort of phenomenology, one that creates amid silences, negations and gaps.

To conclude this chapter, I want to suggest that Scalapino’s idea of an apositional self—perpetually in motion, transitive, moving between the panels of the comic book—is in fact a revolutionary self, similar to the versions of self and subjectivity we’ve witnessed in Stein’s and Hejinian’s work. By revolutionary I mean a conception of self that, through its always-in-motion status, defies any attempt by outside forces, no matter how powerful, to define and thus limit the possibilities of those subjects. Her use of the comic book foregrounds this movement and possibility, partly through its use of the gutters between panels as the space where meaning, to

repurpose Scalapino's words to Ron Silliman, "is there. It is not there." That is, Scalapino's self always already negates itself by resisting the stasis of signified reality. By functioning in the gap, it refuses to stop on the islands of stable selfhood and instead travels perpetually, recreated with each reading, just like the characters in comic books are recreated, another alike, with each new panel, each new artist. We might think of Scalapino's vision of the self as something whose continuity over time is merely a build-up of endless variation, a string of merely alike present moments. Because of Scalapino's focus on the present as the moment of disjunction, the idea of memory being a guiding force in developing the self is rejected in favor of invention and variety.

At one point in *Zither & Autobiography*, during a narration of a mayfly laying eggs and a woman looking through a shop window, she writes, suddenly and in brackets, "[These are comic strips—invented as one goes along, so are from one's mind as ahead and behind it at the same time.]" (65). The mind reading the comic book sees the panels behind and the panels ahead and invents in the spaces between. It is this moment of present invention that Scalapino favors over the stasis of memory. She writes further that it is not "memory" that counts, but "action" (66), and we should think of this action as that creative moment, the mind always *doing something* with the present spaces between those panels before and behind. For Scalapino, the self is this doing. In this, the self becomes a sort of Heideggerian gathering, a world unto itself that does not exist *per se* but always actively gathers. The comic book is a tangible object, a thing that can be held in the hand. But as a text it functions primarily in its own absence, so that the self *as* comic book is most present in its very absence. That is, one truly becomes *oneself* only when others must imagine what that self means, so that self as a concept is rendered a matter of intimate reading experiences, over and over again. Through this intimacy, the creation of self is the

creation of all selves: “One is the same as others—in forest / resistance to any—formation—in life—at all” (*Zither* 81).

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Stein Abbreviations:

CE: *Composition as Explanation*
LIA: *Lectures in America*
SIM: *Stanzas in Meditation*
GHA: *The Geographical History of America*
PP: "Patriarchal Poetry"